**Rebel Columbia**

*Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at [http://archiveofourown.org/works/6037795](http://archiveofourown.org/works/6037795).*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>Gen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Character:</td>
<td>Peter Parker, Original Female Character, Wanda Maximoff, Pietro Maximoff, OCs, Ben Parker, May Parker (Spider-Man), Ned Leeds, James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes, Phil Coulson, Skye</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>POV Female Character, Mutants, yes the twins will be mutants, Super Soldiers, Pre-Avengers (2012), Origin Story, Major Illness, Action/Adventure, Mystery, Canon Compliant, some timeline changes, Angst and Humor, Family, Secret Identity, Minor Original Character(s), Major Original Character(s), SHIELD, Pre-HYDRA Reveal, Music Playlist, Winter Soldier Bucky Barnes, Iron Man 3, Post-Avengers (2012)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of Rebel Columbia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collections:</td>
<td>Original Character-centric MCU fics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2016-02-17 Completed: 2018-11-06 Chapters: 61/61 Words: 336588</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Rebel Columbia**

*by [TheSolarSurfer](http://archiveofourown.org/users/TheSolarSurfer)*

**Summary**

Sick since birth, Amelia Fletcher never had a 'normal' life. But she's always known her cousin and best friend, Peter Parker - loyal to the last. But right when she needs him most, Amelia finds herself alone. She wakes up in a new world, in a new body. Strangers claim to know her, old friends start to feel like strangers, and deadly agents hunt her. Can Mia survive?

Starts Pre-Avengers

**Notes**

I'm going to try my damnedest not to make my OC a Mary Sue.

I'd like to thank good_morning_vietnam for beta-reading the first few chapters :)
Chapter One

Chapter Summary

Mountain // Ludovico Einaudi

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xD-3dlJ2x7E

Snowflakes fell in swirling dances, from the great gray sky to the lonely, gnarling trees below. Silence hung in the air, only marred by the occasional razor hiss of wind or the distant trill of a bird.

It was barren here. The cold had taken whatever life had been harbored and crushed it beneath two feet of snow. These mountains were hardened by the unforgiving season. There were no humans here.

Well...except for one.

As the snow fell in its quiet storm, they alighted upon the pale skin and pale cloth of the girl lying spread-eagle in the drift. Her eyes were closed, her hands and feet completely bare. Her chest rose and fell in soft rhythm, at peace with its surroundings.

How long she had been there? No one could say. The snow was smooth and gleaming. There was no longer any evidence to say how she arrived here. It was almost as if God Himself had just plopped her right in that spot, out of thin air.

Then, a little snowflake, almost too small to mention, landed right on the tip of her nose, a tiny bite of ice.

A tremor passed through her body, starting from her head and shooting down to her toes. Her chest shuddered, fingers twitched.

Her eyes flew open.

The girl surged upwards, her breathing coming out in sharp gasps, suddenly shivering as though her body remembered it should be cold. Her head whipped back and forth, her gaze uncomprehending. These trees were alien, the land unfamiliar. As the world seemed to say, she had no clue how she ended up there. Panic started to set in, her eyes wild and breathing continuing to increase until it seemed sure that she would pass out into the snow again.
Instead, a sudden calm washed over her. A single quiver, a blink, a transformation, and her breathing became regular. She opened her eyes, and the world was clear.

The girl wrapped her arms around herself, rubbing her fingers. They had not yet turned blue. Taking a minute or two to recollect her thoughts, the girl looked around again, her breath coming out in little clouds.

Then, with the sigh of resolution, of a plan made, the girl got to her feet. Took one step and stumbled. Shaky at first, she grabbed a tree to steady herself, before finding her balance and standing straight once more.

She took another step forward, slowly pulling herself away from the snow-angel in the drift. She did not look around, instead keeping her gaze ahead, at some faraway destination.

All she left behind was a scarlet stain that matched the two holes in her back.
Part One: The End of Amelia Fletcher - Chapter Two

Chapter Summary

Mia faces pressure as middle school graduation looms closer but she has yet to be accepted into the same high school as her best friend and cousin, Peter Parker. Meanwhile, an invisible threat looms, ready to take her life.

---

Swing Life Away // Rise Against

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DDuY4m6FqaQ

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

TWO YEARS EARLIER

★

TWO YEARS EARLIER

★
"E-excuse me! C-coming through!"

I had to shove my way through a group of kids all talking, standing in the middle of the hall and causing a traffic jam worse than an accident on the Jersey Turnpike.

I ducked under arms, my small frame affording me at least on advantage in the crowded halls of Frederick Douglass Middle School. Barely gracing five feet tall, I was, as you might say, easy to overlook, even as an elder Eighth Grader. It didn't help that I also failed to stand out in any considerable or impressive way — not only was I too short to be seen over shoulders, but my purple NYU sweater also meant I blended in like an extra in a TV show. The sweater was too big, as most of my clothes were. The sleeves covered my hands, the hems worn with age. This used to be Mom's before I took it.

Frederick Douglass Middle School was old hat. Familiar but dragging. Same faces, same lockers, same smell. I was thirteen and ready to get the hell out. I had one year. Only eight months, one week and two days before I was finally out of here. How long I had left to prove that I could get into Midtown.

For what it was worth, I liked being here. The classrooms were large, the student body small, and the bathrooms...usually clean. Lunch at the cafeteria wasn't as disheartening as it could be, and the halls were spacious if there wasn't a massive clog at the moment.

Calling out was the best I could do, and that wasn't saying much. My voice rasped in my throat, a cough percolating, but I was safe from contaminating anyone just in time — fresh air met me as I finally broke out of the tight jam and stumbled into clear floor.

But my triumph was short-lived. As soon as I walked out, I immediately crashed into someone. Books and notebooks tumbled from my arms as I threw out my arms to catch myself, falling hard to the floor.

"Hey, watch it!" Snapped an older, pissed-off voice. I groaned inwardly as I picked myself up, my elbows aching from taking the fall.

Oh, great. My first run in with the new girl and I've already made her my enemy.

Getting to my knees, I looked up at my latest mistake; with tanned skin and caramel-colored hair, this girl still looked like summer, even though it was September. She was tall, with those open-toe wedges, and a designer Coach purse to make her look more adult than teenager. She looked about sixteen years old and eighty feet tall.

"Jeez, what's wrong with you?" She demanded, kicking away my notebook just as I was about to reach for it. Planting her hands on her hips, the girl sneered down at me with that shiny pink lip-gloss. Around her neck was a gold necklace spelling out the name Astor. "Can't you effing see through those grandma glasses?"

"I-I'm s-sorry," I mumbled, reaching out and trying to pull the fallen books and papers into a messy pile. At least to keep it out of the way of her shoeprints. My glasses, large pink lenses from the 80's, slid down my nose. "I d-didn't m-mean to —" 

"Why-why-why can't you just talk right?" Astor said, mocking my speech patterns in a dumb voice. She paused, squinting at me up and down and wrinkled her nose, "God, are you sick? Please tell me you're not contagious. I can't effing deal with you gross nerds all day."

I didn't know if I caught her on a bad day, or if she was just this insensitive to everyone, but I could
appreciate the way she dressed. Some kids tried to look too old with fancy clothes and make-up, but Astor owned it. She had a commanding presence about her, everything she said loud and judgmental.

It may seem stupid, but it's really hard to argue with someone who sounds like they know what they're talking about. Especially someone like me, who couldn't 'talk right'.

Of course, I certainly didn't make it easy on myself, being the instigator in this event.

"I'm sorry, I —" I winced, feeling my eyes starting to burn, and looked down again so this complete stranger wouldn't see my face turn red. I shook my head, trying to figure out how to deal with this and not look like a complete fool. "I'm n-not sick — well, I am, b-but it's n-not, you're f-fine, I mean, it's g-g-genetic —"

"Omigod, just stop! Just stop talking!" Astor threw up her hands, stepping back with that same disgusted look as if she didn't believe me. "If I keep listening to that I'm gonna lose my mind. Just stay away from me, you got it, Measles?"

Astor Whatever-Her-Last-Name-Is showed up at the very end of last year. She was a year older and probably should be a freshman already, but apparently hadn't made the cut. Until now I hadn't met her, but now I could see how easily outmatched I was. Astor seemed to already be in high school, mentally. Maybe she was mad because she got held back a year, or missed the field hockey tryouts.

"I-I didn't mean — I'm n-not sick —" My voice started to waver as tears threatened to breach my eyes. I knew it was stupid, but I couldn't help what I felt. Why did I have to be such a crybaby? Maybe I wasn't ready for high school. "It's not contagious!"

"Ugh, whatever!" Astor just rolled her eyes and flicked that glossy dark hair over her shoulder, already turning away like she'd already lost interest in me. Face flushed red, I bit my lip and said nothing as I tried to get all much stuff back in order — but then Astor stepped forward, kicking over my stack with a casual but all-too-deliberate with the tip of her sleek heels. She pretended to stumble, tittering, "Oops! Sorry, Measles! Guess I'm just a big ol' klutz. But you understand, right?"

**Measles.** That name made me flinch, even as I fought back tears. Great, I already earned a new moniker, and it wasn't even technically wrong. Sure, I've never had measles specifically (it was one of the few vaccines I was healthy enough for), but I had a record of contracting one disease or another at least once every two years. Astor had no idea how right she was — and that made me hate it more.

But this was my last year at Frederick Douglass. Maybe the nickname wouldn't stick.

"Really, Astor?" Even though I was looking on the ground and couldn't see him, I'd recognize that voice anywhere. Peter. "Do you really have nothing better to do than wasting what's left of your brain cells by picking on a defenseless girl?"

Two beat-up Chuck Taylors came up to stand in front of Astor's boots. I looked up, casting a faint smile at Peter, who had the guts to face her eye-to-eye.

Still shorter than Astor, Peter didn't look afraid, even though Astor could punch the daylights out of him in one swing. I could only think of the very breakable glasses he wore, like me, which tended to get harsh treatment. We always had that in common.

Astor, not surprisingly, didn't see much in him. "Really, Parker, you're gonna start playing hero now? What're you gonna do, recite the Periodic Table at me?"
"It worked last time." He gave her a lopsided grin, clearly oblivious to the danger. Oh, Peter. He should've been taking this more seriously. Now it just looked like he was having fun.

Astor's eyes narrowed dangerously. "Didn't you get stuffed into a locker the other day?"

"W-well, if you think you can top that, give it your best shot," Peter said, his forced cockiness resulting in a shaky, nervous-looking smile. His voice shook a little, but he didn't waver in front of Astor. I couldn't believe it. Was he really going to let Astor hit him? Because she definitely looked like she was going to take him up on that offer, if the clenching of her fists was anything to go by.

It was almost a startling sight. Peter was taller than me, which admittedly was a low bar to begin with, and at five-foot-five he sometimes seemed giant. However, Peter was still nowhere near the height or muscle mass of Astor, or any of the other burgeoning athletes at Douglass. She wouldn't even ruin her make-up beating him up. It was sort of like watching David stand up to Goliath.

Peter stood with his arms out, notebook in one hand and camera in the other, like he expected a hug. "Aw, come on, no love for the nerds?"

Astor wrinkled her nose in disgust, her hands rising to her chest as if she were afraid to even touch him. Backing off, she just huffed, "Ugh, gross. I'm not gonna deal with a whole herd of geeks."

I could only glare at her from my spot crouched on the floor, which earned me a snide look in return, before Astor disappeared in a gust of rich perfume. Shaking my head and telling myself there's no reason to cry, I'm just overreacting, I returned to picking up my books.

A hand entered my field of vision, handing me some collected loose papers. My math homework. I took it, and Peter gave me a victorious grin, bowing dramatically. "The Demogorgon has been vanquished! She shall no longer torment you, milady."

"Ah, th-thank you, b-brave sir knight," I said, my voice fluctuating a little but getting stronger as I began calming down. Astor being gone was a huge relief. Who knew that one little accident would turn into such a big deal. I managed to put on a fake accent, if a rather bad one. Peter was better at this mock-play than I was.

Peter grinned, pleased by my response, and fixed his glasses. He had thick curly brown hair that Uncle Ben wanted him to cut short, but Peter always refused. It currently hung past his eyes and over his ears in a distinctly boyish manner. Secretly, I knew he didn't like it short because Peter still had a bit of baby fat in his cheeks, which he couldn't hide it without a certain length.

Maybe when he was older, it'd be short. But I wasn't holding my breath.

At that moment, there came a squeal of rubber soles on tile, and Peter yelped when someone crashed into him, knocking them both to the ground in a burst of loose papers. I knew, before those papers fluttered to the ground, who it was that just arrived.

"H-hi, Ned," I said, giving the two boys a beleaguered smile as they fell in a heap on the floor.

"Jeez, where are your brakes, dude —" Peter groaned, rubbing his shoulder, lying on his back across the floor.

"Did I miss it?" Ned demanded as he hopped back to his feet, looking back and forth frantically, completely ignoring Peter's complaints. "Hi, Mia! I heard there was a major fight in Hallway D. Apparently Astor decked some loser?"

Ned Leeds, Peter's best friend. Therefore, also my friend. Overweight, with a mop of black hair, and
a gap-toothed, infectious grin, Ned was just as easy to pick on as we were.

Like Peter, Ned always had his trumpet case with him — they were in band together, and as far as I could figure, Ned was far better at keeping himself out of trouble.

Of course, that didn't mean he didn't get bullied, too. Ned and Peter, either through fate or foolishness, tended to get a little too up in the wrong kid's business for their own good. There was an ongoing tally of how many times each boy had been stuffed in a locker (Peter was in the lead with 24 — which is only because he's so skinny he could fit in the tiny lockers of the gym changing room). Nevertheless, we all harbored a hate towards our respective tormentors. Nothing brings people together like a common enemy, right?

"S-sorry, there w-w-wasn't any fight," I said, shaking my head, shifting my backpack on my other shoulder. "The loser w-was Peter trying t-to get himself k-killed, being a-a smart-ass to Astor."

"Dude!" Ned grinned, pleased at the thought. He looked down at Peter, still on the floor, asked, "And you survived? That's baller. Any cute girls see it?"

"This loser? I wish." Peter said, frowning, but took the hand when Ned offered it. Pulled to his feet, Peter continued with a wince, "No cute girls in sight."

"W-what? I d-don't count?" I joked.

"Uh," Ned said in a way that immediately made me regret trying to be funny. "Well, you're no Liz Allen, that's all. No offense, Mia."

I blinked at him, stunned speechless at how badly my self-deprecating joke had backfired so quickly and efficiently. Maybe I was more sensitive about my appearance than I gave myself credit for.

Like Peter, I was small for my age; along with being abnormally short, I also happened to look like I was eleven. Curves, I had not. I barely had muscle, never mind fat. Peter and I had that in common, our smallness, but it was easier for him to blend in. At least he looked normal, if your typical nerd. He'd probably get less picked on if he stopped wearing so many geeky math shirts. Like the one he was wearing now, under his hoodie, which read: INSπRE.

I didn't go outside a lot, for multiple reasons related to my health, so I had a yellowish pallor to my skin. It certainly didn't help making me look sicker than I already was. The shadows under my eyes and the hollow in my cheeks certainly didn't make me look much better, either.

The only thing I really liked about myself was my hair. Not necessarily the color, a dull blonde — but the length. I had been growing it out since I was ten, and now owned an impressive braid. I didn't have the time or motivation to anything special with it; I was just happy with what I already had.

Peter, thankfully, had the decency to look mortified at Ned's choice of words, and quickly dug an elbow into Ned's side. It made me feel a bit better, enough to say, "You mean you guys' double crush?"

Like us, Liz was smart; she had been at the top of her class when she still went to Douglass. But unlike us she was a year older, cool, attractive, and had a boatload of friends that none of us could hope to attain. She had already graduated to Midtown, probably already forgotten the two dorks who never had the guts to talk to her; Peter and Ned haven't stopped dreaming of her since.

"Double crush?" Peter and Ned repeated in unison, at varying levels between offended and embarrassment. "No way!"
"When I get to Midtown, I'm definitely asking her out," Ned said confidently, hooking a thumb to his chest. "I'll have to have grown at least an inch by then! Maybe lose some weight, too. Everyone will take me seriously then!"

"You? Serious? C'mon," Peter snorted with a toss of his head. "You don't have a serious bone in your body."

"Do too! Maybe you don't see it, but Liz will! She always sees the best in me."

"I'm pretty sure she has never laid eyes on you before. I bet she won't even remember your name next year."

"Oh, what, like you have a better chance than me."

"I-I don't know, maybe," Peter flushed at the accusation, glancing away. Uncle Ben had been teasing him ever since Fifth Grade about asking a girl to a dance. In the past four years, he had done neither. Asking a girl or going to a dance, that is. "Maybe I'll grow two inches before freshman year."

"Th-that's even if either o-of you two get i-into Midtown," I replied, raising a lone eyebrow at this nonsense. "Can't a-ask her out if y-you don't get i-in first."

"Oh, we will," Ned said, sharing a look with Peter before nodding once, self-assured. "I know it. The first thing I'm doing when I walk through those doors is finding Liz and asking her out to the Homecoming dance…. or whatever it is they have."

"You g-guys are unreal, y-you know th-that?" I said, and yet I found myself smiling nonetheless. I'd never admit it aloud; Ned and Peter were one of the best things about high school for me. Maybe I didn't have a lot of friends. But the ones I had, they mattered. They had my back.

Even if, sometimes, they made stupid bets.

✮✮✮

I didn't really have any friends besides those two jokers.

It was kind of sad, really, if you thought about it, since Peter was already my cousin. By default, we had to like each other, at least a little bit. Our family was pretty lucky we got along so well, otherwise our constant family gatherings (aided by the fact we lived less than a mile from each other, separated only by the East River) would get really awkward. And with Ned, we were always hanging out together.

Midtown was all they ever talked about. It was the dream school, and not just because Liz Allen was there. Unlike other potential high schools we could end up in, Midtown was meant for nerds like us. Personalized curriculums, wide range of programs, highest SAT percentile in the tri-state area, near-guaranteed college acceptance, seven different varsity sports, a national championship winning AcaDec team, and more student-based clubs and teams than you could shake a stick at. Anything you wanted, you could find at Midtown.

I wanted to go, too. I wasn't sure why. Maybe I didn't have much of a choice. Either go to Midtown
with Peter, or end up alone in a school I didn't want, with people I didn't know.

"Mia?" A voice jarred me back to the present. I looked up from my notebook, startled to find the entire body of Mr. Barchard's science class focused on me. Mr. Barchard was frowning. "Mia, are you listening?"

"Uh," I glanced down at my notes, then back up at the board; my notes didn't match, but of course they didn't. I wasn't writing about anything related to English. But Mr. Barchard had written a question in chalk, though. It took me a long second to deconstruct each word. 'Who is the titular Prometheus in Frankenstein?'

I thought I could save myself by just giving him an answer straight out. "...Adam, the Monster?"

Snickers filled the room, and my face turned hot when I realized I must've made a mistake. Mr. Barchard just gave me a dry smile and said, "Well, that's a valid interpretation. But I was asking if you could open the window to your left. It's stifling in here."

"Oh." My face could probably put a tomato to shame at this point, and I ducked my head as I got out of my seat, reaching over to the window sill and lifting it upwards. Maybe it was hot in here, not that I could tell. I wore two layers as a basis of fact; I usually didn't have to during the summer, when the temperature was more suitable for my body. But we were having a cold snap, and I was really starting to feel it.

Only the window frame wouldn't give, no matter how hard I tried. My arms trembled and my knuckles turned white with the effort of pushing against the pane; the wood seemed to be stuck in its groove, perhaps after having gone unused for so long.

I was practically out of breath before I heard Mr. Barchard sigh and say, "Okay, okay, don't hurt yourself there, Mia. Can someone help her, please?"

There was more snickering behind me as I let go of the window, my arms falling limply to my sides.

"It's so sad, I can barely watch." a girl said behind her hand to her friend amongst the small chorus of whispers. "Shouldn't kids like her be in a hospital or something?"

All the little words burned in my ears, and I glanced at them, those whisperers, who only chickened out at my gaze and broke down into embarrassed laughter. Mr. Barchard's watchful gaze kept it from turning into a big deal, but I didn't need it to know what everyone was thinking.

Then a chair scraped back and a shoulder bumped me aside. I was too embarrassed to look up to see who it was. A boy, at least, bigger than me. I stood out of the way as he hefted the window open with all the ease of lifting a pencil. At once I was both furious and envious of him. I wished I had strength like that, the ability to do what I wanted, whatever I wanted, without the feeling of everyone judging me, all the time.

I couldn't tell if he was doing this because he wanted to look good, helping the sick little girl with a window she was too weak to open; or was just annoyed with how long I was taking and decided to just get it over with. At least with the latter it meant that everyone else could shut up and move on quicker.

I hated him a little more because, honestly, both could be true. Maybe he wanted that bit of glory for getting the annoying Amelia "Measles" Fletcher out of the way.

A cool breeze washed over me under the open window, and I shivered a little. Hugging my arms, I returned to my seat and decided not to complain about the new chill that didn't bother anyone else. I
had a jacket to wear, anyways.

As much as I didn't like some of these kids, I wasn't going to ask them to change this for me; I had no right to force them to do anything they didn't want to. It was hot due to the faulty heating system in this particular room, and the majority needed to cool down. Some of them were even sweating... although maybe from the difficulty of the class.

"Okay, now that everyone's settled again," Mr. Barchard started as the boy returned to his seat and everyone was done whispering. "Let's get back to the topic at hand. And next time, Mia, please pay attention."

I nodded silently, smiling like the good little student I was, but nevertheless returned to my previous task before this little humiliating debacle put me on center stage. I was already thinking of the wall of acceptances down by the front office; I wanted to see who else got their early admissions in. Most people won't know until after Christmas break. My letter should be coming in soon.

Hopefully.

To be honest, I hadn't been paying attention to Mr. Barchard because it bored me. English was always my hardest class. English in general was hard. Reading and writing had always been a struggle for me, on the most basic level. Dyslexia and dysgraphia were the medical terms for it, I supposed. Had them for as long as I could remember.

Handwriting was a pain, I couldn't make it look good unless I was copying something without actually reading it. Typing was better, but then, I didn't own a personal computer. Instead of taking notes, I used a school-approved tape recorder for all my classes. Parsing through Frankenstein had been a trip and a half. Obviously, I read slow, but I usually made myself read things over twice to make sure I fully understood something.

Was it hard? Yes. Tedious? Absolutely. But I refused to let another setback keep me from getting into Midtown.

It had no bearing on my actual intelligence level, I knew, even if it didn't always feel that way. Its hard not to feel stupid, sometimes, when I could barely read above a third-grade level without effort.

There were also just the standard aspects of literature I just did not get on a fundamental level. The application of it, that is; I didn't understand what subtext was or how to spot it; how to know what a theme is and what the author is trying to say with it. Why does it have to be so complex? Why couldn't Mary Shelley just say 'Science is Bad, Don't Play God and Make Life out of Dead Bodies'.

For the record, I liked science. I wasn't as good at it as Peter or Ned, and it still involved copious amount reading that made me a less-than-ideal lab partner, but at least it made sense.

The only part that mattered was getting sufficient grades in my class to keep my scholarship. Even if it was for disabilities, I still had to prove I was able to do the work required, and prove I was smart enough to earn it. Thanks to my developmental issues, it just too me longer than usual to do what everyone else did.

My disability wasn't exactly noticeable, at least not immediately. I wasn't in a wheelchair, or carried a cane, and I could walk around like the rest of 'em. Just don't ask me to run, or be out in the cold for longer than a few hours.

On the bad days, I had to bring an oxygen tank in with me. On the really bad days, I didn't come to school at all.
"All right, class," Mr. Barchard said as the bell rung, once more startling me out of a reverie. I really needed to stop doing that. "I want you to do the questions on Chapters 7 and 10, and then the review for the test. Essays are coming up and I want to see some effort!"

Half the class was already out the door before I even had my stuff gathered. I had opened my bag when I saw Mr. Barchard approaching my desk, and quickly stuffed my notebook, along with the pages of code I'd written on it, into the bag before he could see. "Mia, can I speak to you for a second?"

"Uh, okay," I said, straightening. There was a look in Mr. Barchard's face I didn't like. The pinch in his brow, that concern that meant this wasn't going to be the regular pep talk. I couldn't help my newfound nervousness slip into my voice. "W-what's the matter?"

"Well, I don't know how to say this, but," Mr. Barchard's started, glancing away from me then back, fiddling with his tie. He always wore bold-patterned sweater vests that looked fine from afar, but were distracting up close. "You're not, uh, you're not having any problems in this class, are you?"

"Uh, no," I said, frowning. Was this about my grades? Had I gotten the question wrong earlier? "Is this about the-the test? Did I do something wrong?"

"No, no, nothing like that," Mr. Barchard shook his head. He was middle-aged, with a dark mustache and gold-rimmed glasses, and probably knew more about 1800's literature than I ever would. He was always friendly with students, and I liked him well enough, but this was the longest conversation I've had with him. His awkwardness would only make mine worse. "I just mean, er, you're very quiet in class. You don't raise your hand. I know you're learning, you're doing well on all the homework, it's just...you don't seem to get along with the other students."

"Oh," I said, my mouth pressing into a thin line. This again. "I a-already had the 'Participation in Class' chat at the PTA m-meeting last month, Mr. Barchard."

"And every year before that, I added privately."

"I know, I'm not- I'm not trying to criticize you, it's just…" Mr. Barchard paused to fiddle with his tie some more, focusing on a bookcase over my head as he found his next words. "You don't seem to have a lot of extracurriculars, is what I'm saying. You're not in any clubs, any social groups. You have good grades, Mia, but colleges are also looking for other qualities in you. Your interests, hobbies, other languages, teamwork, leadership…"

"I mean, I can sp-speak Spanish." I blinked, a little bewildered. I'd taken two classes, but it was the Medinas who lived next door to me that really helped with that. "Does that count?"

"But you're not in the Spanish Club, is what I'm saying." Mr. Barchard pointed out. "Don't you have any interests outside of your classwork?"

The notebook felt like fiery beacon in my backpack, but I ignored it. "Not really, no. I just want to graduate on time. I almost got held back last year."

"Yes, I know, I'm aware your medical situation," Mr. Barchard closed his eyes and nodded, somewhat aggrieved. "But that shouldn't stop you from branching out, Mia. Don't let your...your weaknesses inhibit you."

"My what?" I snapped, a little sharper than was appropriate. But I was so stunned by his word choice that I didn't consider my tone. "My weaknesses?"

"Uh, that's not what I meant!" Mr. Barchard realized his mistake and swung his hands back, shaking
them in a gesture of panic. "Your fears, Mia. You're holding yourself back because you're afraid. And you shouldn't be. You should be a part of something, Mia. Have fun, at least. Make friends."

"I do have friends," I said, stuffing the rest of my things into my backpack in preparation to leave. I just wanted to go, now. The bell had rung twice already, the call for students to go home or attend these little clubs that Mr. Barchard seemed so convinced in wanting me to join. "I've got Peter."

"He's your cousin," Mr. Barchard pointed out, wincing a little.

"There's Ned, too."

"Ned, as in the Ned Leeds who keeps losing my books?" Mr. Barchard asked, and when I nodded, another expression flickered over his face. It wasn't exactly approval. He scratched his chin. "Well, he's got a good heart, that Ned. But don't you know anyone a little bit more... responsible?"

I must've had a nasty look on my face, because he quickly added, "All I'm saying is, that its Eighth Grade, the finish line. Why not make a statement of it? Put that extra kick in your high school applications."

What the hell was he talking about? I just stared at him, baffled. Was he concerned about me getting into high school? "There's something wrong with my applications? Is there not enough?"

"No, no, you're missing the point —" Mr. Barchard began, then dropped his hands, defeated. Whatever argument he was trying to make was clearly lost on me. "I just mean... you're going to move on from Frederick Douglass, and that's always a good thing. But whenever you're ready, just ask yourself this one question: what are you leaving behind?"

What was I leaving behind? Was he serious?

Clearly, he was, but I just had no recourse on how to answer. I still didn't know what answer he was looking for. My gut boiled in frustration. It was just like answering one of his damn English questions. There didn't seem to be any clear, correct answer.

"Yeah, sure, whatever," I just bobbed my head in a quick nod, hoping to appease him so I could finally leave. Mr. Barchard stepped aside and I couldn't get out of that classroom fast enough.
Peter and Mia, first day of school

art by me :)

Chapter End Notes

EDIT 4/3/2019: Gave Amelia dyslexia/dysgraphia thanks to an ongoing headcanon i really liked. Also trimmed a few details and hopefully got rid of some annoying typos.
Chapter Three

Thanks for the reviews so far, guys! And thanks to one of my readers who messaged me, for pointing out I hadn't put a physical description of Mia in the last chapter, so I went back and added one. It's not everything about her appearance, but I think its enough until the next chapter :) I've had this chapter done for a few weeks now, but decided to hold out until I finished Falcon: Sub Rosa, which is now done!

I also added an image to the end of the prologue. Consider it the book cover of this fic :)

Anyways, hope you enjoy!

Chapter Three

✮

I stood in front of the wall of accepted students, reading down the list for the hundredth time. Soon. Soon my name would be up there.

It wasn’t a long list. Only those with early admissions; the regular testers wouldn’t get their offers until next year. But the secretary had made some recent edits, and even though I knew my name wouldn’t be up there without me knowing about it first, I was still swept away by the thought that I would see my name next to ‘Midtown.’

Everyone took tests and applied to their two schools of choice. Midtown was one of eight specialized institutions a New York kid could go to, and you had to take the SHSAT.

Most kids applied and tested in the Eighth grade. I, Peter, and a couple of others had paid for and taken it last spring, when we met the age requirement. It had been bad timing for me; leading up to the test I had come down with a bad cold that knocked me out of school for two weeks. I had struggled between studying for the SHSAT and catching up with homework. Possibly even made it worse by working so hard; but it’d be worth if it I got in.

I just needed to get in. Just one offer. That was all I wanted.

The halls were nearly empty now — the last bell had rung and anyone who wasn’t in some after school activity had already left. Right now, I was waiting for Peter, who was mysteriously absent at the moment. I never walked home without him, so I settled myself for a wait.

Mr. Barchard’s words still ratted around in my head. The list was supposed to distract me. It wasn’t working, so I tried to make myself angry instead.

Flash Thompson’s name was at the top of the list. He was the first to get his offer into Midtown, and had been gloating since the start of September. The look of dismay on Peter’s face when he found out would’ve been funny if it weren’t also devastating. Peter had also wanted Midtown, thinking
Flash wouldn’t be smart enough to get in.

I started to pace. Flash’s acceptance was no deterrence to my determination to get in. Peter had already gotten his acceptance a few days ago and that was all I needed to know.

The thing with applying to Midtown is that they didn’t look at my academic grades. Just the SHSAT. So, they wouldn’t see the fluctuation of scores thanks to my absences. I just had to prove I was smart enough to get in.

And pray they had enough open seats left.

I had also applied to Brooklyn Technical and Stuyvesant, as back-ups. They were both equally as good.

But they wouldn’t have Peter.

Pacing back and forth just inside the school doors, I had to remind myself to calm down before I gave myself a heart attack. I was a little young, but considering my current state of health, I certainly wouldn’t put it outside the realm of possibility.

Why did Mr. Barchard think I could use help? Did I just look like I needed it? Sure, I didn’t really have a lot of friends here, so what? It was just middle school. I probably wouldn’t even remember it in a few years. What did it matter if I left an impact or not? What did that even mean?

Middle school was just a stepping stone to Midtown. That was it. No more complicated than that.

I thought it was a little weird how he mentioned Michelle Jones, now that I thought about it. Did she have something to do with this?

"If you keep doing that, you're gonna wear a ditch in the floor."

I jolted at the voice, looking around. Speak of the devil, Michelle was standing there, leaning against a pillar of the overhang, and giving me an inscrutable look. She was the type of girl to wear leather jackets, and wore sunglasses during class even though it was against the school code — and still kick your ass in Physics. I was also insanely envious of her thick, curly brown hair, up in an unkempt ponytail — but she still pulled it off, and made my own hair look like dishwater in comparison.

(I mean, it looked like dishwater anyways, but next to Michelle my thin braid looked downright pitiful).

I couldn't remember if she'd been there the whole time or if she just showed up, and I looked away. Michelle always unnerved me a little. Unapproachable, I've never seen her genuinely smile. Although she was in the same year as me, she seemed older somehow, more mature. Less like Astor, who tried to appear grown-up, and more like Michelle just didn’t care about anything. Did she?

Michelle had a funny way of blending in, going overlooked until she made herself noticed. Usually by saying something that was mildly controversial, thereby annoying the teacher and sending the class into snickers. She was a riot in History — always bringing up little details that made previously great historical figures back down to earth with humanizing, sometimes dark truths about who they were.

Perhaps noticing how skittish I was, Michelle gave me a rare, close-lipped smirk. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you. Waiting for Peter?"

"Uh, y-yeah," I said, glancing away, at the doors, feeling embarrassed although not being sure why.
The fact that Michelle appeared right as I was thinking about her made me feel like she was psychic, and was only being nice to me because she knew better. "He's t-taking a while. N-not sure what's g-going on."

"Last I saw him, he was in Rooney's office."

I had to restrain myself from giving a pained sigh. Principal Rooney, that couldn't be good. I frowned at Michelle, saying, "Oh, no. What h-happened this time?"

"Only the usual fake-macho-idiot-bullshit," Michelle said, tilting her head thoughtfully. She bounced on her feet, and I got the feeling she didn't consider the situation as seriously as I did. Was I just overreacting? She flicked her hair over her shoulder. "He and Flash had a little, ah, confrontation, if you know what I mean."

"Why a-a-am I not s-surprised?" I said, a weak smile forming on my face. Okay, so I was overreacting, but at least this time I didn't have to worry about it. Peter didn't often get into trouble; any black marks on his records he usually got from dealings with guys like Flash. "I g-guess it c-could be worse.""

"Well, that's looking on the bright side," Michelle said sarcastically, then laughed. Startled, having never heard her laugh before, I couldn't help but join in a little, partly out of self-embarrassment. Okay, I'll say this: I liked Michelle a little more now. Turned out, she had a smile that made you feel amazing, and she didn't treat me like the invalid I was, so that was a bonus. I wondered if she could tell I was still a little worked up from my run-in with Astor today, if she had any idea that I had to deal with her. I mean, it wasn't like I was going to bring it up. Michelle wasn't friends with Astor as far as I knew — hell, I didn't think Michelle had any friends at all. She always ate alone at lunch. I never thought to ask why; again, she intimidated me.

"Have you done that stupid report in History yet?" Michelle just shook her head, looking annoyed as she crossed her arms. "I can't believe Mrs. James is making us write four pages in September."

"I-I think I've g-got three p-pages done?" I said, thinking back to the mess of papers and projects on my desk at home. "I h-haven't t-typed it up yet. At l-least it's o-on World War T-Two, like the easiest s-subject ev-ever."

"Cuz' it's not like we don't have enough to do already," Michelle said with a roll of her eyes. Being an Honors student like us meant that homework was pretty much the only fun you were going to have five days out of the week. And I wasn't even on the decathlon team. "I think half the class is writing about Captain America. Mrs. James is probably going to hate him as much as HYDRA once she's done reading them all. Why can't she give us someone interesting, someone with an actual name, like Peggy Carter or Abraham Erskine? People who actually did more in their lives than some guy who was in the war for less than a year."

"I th-think they're j-just excited," I said, which seemed to be a better answer than 'pure laziness' because, well, it probably was for the most part. Captain America was about as hard a topic to write about as George Washington or Abraham Lincoln, at least in the USA. "D-Did you hear about the rumors they m-may have finally found his ship a-after all this time? There's a b-big expedition going on in the Arctic circle r-right now, but the g-government won't t-talk about it."

"I know," Michelle sighed, rocking on her heels in impatience. Her boots were leather, too, I noticed. Designer or thrift shop? With Michelle, it could be either. "I just want them to publicly release a statement or something, at least tell us it's his ship they found, if they're not going to show the body."
I cringed a little at the thought. I wasn’t a fan of gory details, even if was just the potentially frozen ice cube of a dead body. “I d-don’t know, that seems a-a little morbid.”

"You make a fair point, Mia," she said, nodding. I expected Michelle to add more, but when she didn't, an awkward silence fell between us.

Maybe it was my fault. I was still suspicious she had something to do with Mr. Barchard’s conversation earlier, and I had no idea how to broach the topic. I didn't want to make her angry — I didn't like causing trouble like that. I could barely defend myself verbally, never mind physically. I was better off not saying anything at all.

Still, I couldn't just stand there chasing circles in my mind. "Uh, M-Michelle…"

I lost my gall before I could finish, but Michelle looked down and said, "Yeah?"

Her voice made me jolt a little, and I closed my eyes, trying to steel my nerves. I took a breath and tried again. "...Um, d-did you, uh, h-have you s-s-seen Mr. B-Barchard recently?"

"Hmm. Nope."

She sounded so nonchalant, so curious that I thought I'd made a mistake, and I almost didn't want to keep going with this. "He just, uh, m-mentioned you. He t-talked to me after class. Said I should… make a statement, since it’s the last year and all. Think about what I'm leaving behind."

"Really?" Michelle blinked, surprised. Then her face settled back into an expression I couldn't read. "Huh. What did you say?"

"Um," I couldn't hold her gaze. Looking people in the eye freaked me out almost as much as talking to them. How could I explain this without sounding totally lame? I could only mutter, "I'm n-n-not really g-good at talking t-to people."

"Oh, please," Michelle snorted, nudging me kindly in the shoulder. It was pretty easy, since she was almost a head taller than me. "That's the excuse of someone who knows people won't like what they have to say. Maybe he just meant about what you’ve done so far, that people will remember. You are kind of a wallflower. No offense."

"N-none taken." I was starting to wonder if maybe she was lying to me. It didn't seem to fit the Michelle I knew, who typically just said whatever was on her mind; but maybe she'd do it so I wouldn't get angry at her, or something. "I just…don't w-want t-to stay here a-anymore, that’s all. Who cares what I’m leaving behind."

"Well, maybe he's right?" Michelle frowned a little. That was not what I wanted to hear. “When you’re gone, is anyone going to miss you? Is anyone going to notice?”

The words were a slap to my face. Cold bitterness flared in my gut. You mean, besides being the resident cancer girl? People would probably be relieved once I was gone.

I just frowned and looked away, focusing on a corner as I tried to find the right words to say to that. Didn't they get it? I didn't want this. I didn't want to be noticed. I didn't want to be seen. And when I was, I knew exactly what they saw whenever I started coughing, just because I raised my voice half a decibel. I was better off when I couldn't be seen. That's what I wanted to say.

"I-I don't know," was what I actually said. I could only shrug half-heartedly. "I j-just d-don’t think it’s that i-important. I have to focus on the future."
"Well, I think you're missing out on a lot if you do," Michelle said, trying to sound encouraging, and it only made me more frustrated because she was right. Before I could try (and fail) to counter that point, her head turned away and she said, "Oh, hey, that's my ride. See you later, Mia."

"Yeah," I said as she trotted off, ponytail bouncing behind her. My voice was too small to carry after. "S-see you l-later. I g-guess."

It was easy to tell which car pulled up was for Michelle. A blue Camry, as nondescript as Michelle, purred softly as she slipped into the backseat. The windows were dark — I couldn't see who was driving, but it looked like a woman. Curly hair. Michelle's mom? Until this point, I never thought of Michelle having parents. A part of me just assumed she lived on another plane of reality when not in school.

"Hey, was that Michelle?" Peter appeared beside me, mouth agape. He looked down at me, eyes wide. "I didn't know you guys were friends."

Ned appeared on my other side, gazing after Michelle with a slight squint. "Wait, Michelle Jones? Isn't she kinda weird?"

I rolled my eyes, heading for the street now that they were here. "We're not friends, Pete. W-we just t-talked a little. A-and yeah," I added as an afterthought. "She's p-pretty weird."

Then I looked at Peter, and did a double-take as his black eye. "Whoa, nice sh-shiner. D-did you get i-into a real f-fight this time?"

"Oh, right," Peter's hand flew up to his face, and he ducked his head in embarrassment. "Yeah, uh, maybe don't tell Aunt May or Uncle Ben about this, okay?"

"Yeah, I-I'm sure they'd b-be really impressed how y-you p-picked a fight with someone," I said, raising my eyebrows as Peter checked his reflection in a nearby window, to see how bad the damage was. I had a feeling I'd have to help him cover it up later. "I t-take it Flash won?"

Peter opened his mouth to reply, but it was Ned who snorted. "Ha! Like Peter stood a chance."

"Wow, thanks, Ned," Peter threw him an annoyed look, turning around and walking backwards to face us while he was talking. We passed under the sleek white gates of the school. "Flash was faster, as usual. And I don't pick fights, I was just, you know, in the wrong place in the wrong time."

I just shook my head. I had no idea how things went down, but there was no doubt that Peter tended to stick his nose into things that didn't concern him. More often than not, it got him (and me) into trouble. Honestly, I was afraid Peter might snap someday and get himself straight-up murdered — maybe from confronting Astor again, or someone else I made angry. And I didn't want him to think I needed him to protect me, that I was defenseless. I hated the very idea of needing it at all, and if anyone else had that idea, I wasn't sure what I'd do with myself then.

I just asked, "S-so, what really h-happened?"

"Lunch period. Flash socked me in the face." Peter said, frowning at my tone. We set off at a walking pace; since I was shorter, Peter and Ned slowed down to match me. Still walking backwards, Peter stuck a thumb to his chest, "I was actually just minding my own business this time. I was just sitting with Ned, and Flash walked up and asked for my desert. And you know how good the cookies are here...well, I said no, and he flicked my tray and tried to get mash potatoes on me. But it sort of ended up on his leather jacket instead..."

"Oh, no. N-not the leather jacket."
"Oh yeah, the leather jacket." Ned nodded gravely.

Peter continued: "So I get pounded, and he takes my camera. Un-freaking-believable."

"Y-You didn't tell the teachers?"

"Mr. Strickland was there, and he gets Flash to hand over the camera, but then he takes it himself! It's probably locked in Strickland's office somewhere. No way I'm getting inside."

"Well, n-not by yourself."

Ned looked surprised. He jerked a thumb at me, while looking at Peter, "Uh, is Mia stating a desire to commit illegal acts? I think that's called premeditated,"

"I think that only applies to murder," Peter squinted his eyes at me. "Are you serious, though? Imagine how much trouble we'd get in if Strickland found out."

"Well, the t-trick is not g-getting caught," I said, rolling my eyes. Peter looked scandalized, and Ned gasped dramatically, making me laugh. I punched Ned in the shoulder, adding, "I'm just kidding! O-obviously, we won't b-break in, sheesh. You sh-should just go t-talk to Mr. Strickland t-tomorrow, ask for it b-back. Maybe go t-to Principal Rooney i-if you have to."

"Ugh, yeah, because that'll work out so well, what with me being in his office today, black eye and all." Peter sniffed, unsatisfied.

"Well, I'd love to help you guys solve this fascinating conundrum," Ned said, as we came to a halt at a bus stop. Just in time, too, as a blue bus came in on squeaking brakes. Ned hooked a thumb over his shoulder as the bus doors open, and a line of people started filing out. "But this is my ride. Mom is gonna be pissed if I'm late to starting dinner again."

"Shoot me a text if you think of anything!" Peter called, cupping his hand over his mouth as Ned hopped onboard. The bus kicked back into gear, and as it drove us, Ned gave us a thumbs-up through the window. We returned the gesture, and started walking again as the bus continued behind us.

"One man down," Peter wiped at his cheek, winced when it pulled at the bruise. "Ow. I think we should keep brainstorming. The quality of ideas has been subpar lately. Maybe I should just go solo..."

I knew he was just teasing me, but still, I jabbed him with my elbow, earning an impish smile in return. "You w-wouldn't last a-a second without me. E-every pilot needs his wingman. Or, uh, wing-woman."

"Yeah, you're my Goose," he said, slinging an arm around my shoulder, getting me in a headlock and nearly dragging me along. It was all in good fun, but I was having a hell of a time trying to wriggle out. "Wait, so does that make me Maverick?"

"You g-got the chops f-for it," I said, poking at his face. I decided not to criticize the new nickname; I happened to like Top Gun, as one of the better 80's movies we marathon on the weekends. "If you k-keep this up, Maverick. S-so long as I-I'm not the one that dies and g-gets replaced by some asshole th-that you didn't even like i-in the f-first place."

"What? Are you kidding me?" he said, sounding offended I would even mention it. "You can't be replaced. The only way anyone can replace you is if they put your brain into a specially-designed android body."
"One th-that has good lungs and im-immunity to all diseases. S-so I don't g-get pneumonia again."

"And has killer biceps, like mine," Peter added, flexing for effect. There wasn't much to look at, and I would've laughed, except I was out of breath and had to take a break, leaning against a lamppost to steady myself. Just walking for too long could wind me. Without even hesitating, Peter bent down beside me. "Piggyback?"

That was also something he did, carrying me, from back when we were little. Peter was no weight-lifter, but compared to me he was as strong as the Hulk. Not that I weighed much to begin with. I took the offer without complaint. Peter grunted I wrapped my arms around his neck, and he hook his arms under my knees, lifting me off the ground with a little struggle. "Man, what have you been eating, Goose? A whole hamburger?"

"Ha-ha."

"No, seriously!" Peter said earnestly, walking along with ease now. I bobbed up and down with his footsteps. "Another hamburger and you'd weigh more than me. And I need someone to protect me whenever Flash decides to ruin my life again."

"S-so I'm your wing-woman and your s-second in b-battle?" I said, pulling an exaggerated face. "I'm not liking our chances very much."

"Are you kidding?" Peter said cheerfully, skipping a little and making me bounce and giggle. People stared and skirted around us, two weird kids gathering too much attention on the street. "You know what Uncle Ben says! Doesn’t matter what it is we want, as long as we’re together, we’re unstoppable!"

✮✮✮

"Dr. Kane will see you now."

Mom's hands closed around mine, warm and calloused. "That's us, honey bee."

"I kn-know, Mom." I could feel her nervous energy beside me, expectant and hopefully, even though she was trying to hide it. But I could see it in her smile, her tapping foot, the constant checking of time.

If I looked younger than I was, then Mom looked older, because I didn't know any adult who had as prominent crow’s feet or worry lines on her face at their age. I bit my lip and glanced away; it was my fault they were there. She had blonde hair, where I got it from — it was maybe the only thing we had in common. I couldn't see much of her in myself when I looked in a mirror.

The lobby we sat in was comfortable, if a little stale. Monochromatic, modern furniture, glass coffee tables, wide windows. The ceiling was high, although there was an antiseptic smell, as if this place was spot-cleaned with bleach every morning. This didn't look like a clinic so much as a state-of-the-art science facility, or maybe a software company. I felt out of place, with my dirty shoes tracking in dirt, and the frayed sweater I couldn't stop picking at.

Mom always dressed her best, in soft leather shoes and the only blazer she owned, along with her favorite brooch, a gold multi-pointed star. All an effort, not just to look good, but to put her best face forward. Or foot forward. However the saying went.
Now, a part of me thought it was futile, trying to be fancy when it proved nothing. But I also appreciated the effort; Mom still cared, cared enough to wear her best clothes for these meetings, to keep my spirit up. Especially today.

I thought it had died a long time ago, but as we stood up and followed the nurse through the clinic, I felt a strange bit of hope in my gut, going up to my heart and down to my toes. This was it.

I held on to that feeling as we stepped into Dr. Kane's office. A floor-to-ceiling window to our right revealed a lovely view of downtown Manhattan. Along the walls were black shelving, filled with books on medicine and biology; awards, plaques, trophies; as well as the occasional miniature bronze sculpture, everything was perfectly organized and picturesque. It matched the olive-skinned woman sitting at her desk, dark curly ponytail brushed over her white coat. She looked up as we entered, a small smile on her lips. "Oh, Mia, Ms. Fletcher, welcome. Please sit down. We have much to talk about."

We took the two seats in front of Dr. Kane's desk, and she set down her pen, lacing her fingers across the black wood. Dr. Kane fixed me with a kind, appraising look. "So, Mia, tell me how you've been doing lately."

I blinked, shrugged my shoulders. "I-I don't know. Same as-as usual, I gu-" I was interrupted by a cough flew up my chest, and it took me a second to recover. "...Sorry. I've been c-coughing a little, l-lately."

"I think she might've picked up something at school," Mom said, rubbing her thumb across the top of my hand.

Dr. Kane raised her eyebrows at me, jotting something down on her notepad. "Sounds like your asthma is working up again, Mia. Have you been using your inhaler?"

"Yeah." I said, unable to hide the annoyance in my voice. I got asked those questions a lot when something went wrong; did you take your medicine? Are you sure you didn't forget? You need to take them every day yada yada yada. I wasn't a helpless little kid.

Mom squeezed my hand in warning, frowning at me. I sighed, frustrated. This just felt like pleasantries as we avoided the real problem, what Dr. Kane was going to tell us. "Y-you said in your m-message that there's news? Ab-about the list?"

"Has she been moved up?" Mom leaned forward in her seat. Her hand, so much bigger, nearly crushed mine in anticipation.

We had been waiting for this day for so long. A part of me still couldn't believe that it might come. Ever since I was six and the doctors first determined the best way to fix me, permanently, I had been sitting around as my name on a list in a database somewhere went up and down a massive list of patients waiting for the right organs. For me, the big one was kidneys. Dr. Kane had even suggested liver and pancreas, although I personally preferred some new lungs, thanks.

Either way, I hadn't really heard anything about it aside from the occasional reminder that I was a little closer to salvation.

I couldn't help but indulge in the little fantasy. Of me being able to breathe again, live again, without worrying about one stray bacteria, or a virus suddenly rendering me bedridden for weeks. I wouldn't have to miss school again. I wouldn't have to do a month of homework over a single week. I could keep up with everyone, or at least Peter. I'd kick his ass in dodgeball.
I wouldn’t get better right away, of course. But I could finally get a taste of real freedom.

Maybe that’s why I didn’t complain when Mom’s grip started to hurt. I was leaning forward in my chair, too. More than anything, I wanted this. I needed this.

Dr. Kane paused, her shoulders deflating in a sigh. She glanced between the two of us before she said, "...No. I’m sorry to tell you this, Mia, but your place was taken by someone else."

"W-what?" I felt my heart drop into my stomach. Out of the corner of my eye, I watched Mom slowly collapse back into her seat, as if the wind had been knocked out of her. "Why?"

Dr. Kane frowned, perhaps detecting the anger, or even the panic, in my voice. "Someone else proved more urgent. They needed the kidneys more, and it was decided your case could wait a little longer."

"How much longer?" Mom asked, rising up again. Only a moment before, she had looked defeated; before that, trembling hope. What I saw now was a set jaw, the hand loosened, but still firm on my own. "I thought, after seven years…"

"Well, as you already know, we've been having difficulty finding a good match. Mia has a very unique set of antibodies that, along with her blood-type, has made it extremely difficult finding a donor. Anything short of a hundred percent match could be fatal — honestly, she would live longer if we just waited."

"But f-for how long?" I repeated, my fingers tightening around the armrests.

Dr. Kane bowed her head slightly, as if steeling her nerves, and I knew I wasn't going to like the answer. "I'm going to be honest, Mia — I don't know. Nothing is really guaranteed, even when you're at the top of the list. There are so many variables to consider —"

"I know about the variables!" I snapped, cutting her off without thinking. My mind had already gone over this situation thousands of times, when I was alone and trying to find an answer. It was an exercise in futility. The words flew off my tongue, easy and sharp in my anger. "It's nothing but variables, it's an equation that doesn't work, there's no right answer!"

"Amelia!" Mom admonished, throwing me a scandalized look. I could see the pain and disappointment in her eyes, not expecting my outburst.

"I—" I wanted to keep going, to explain to them what this all meant to me, just how much I’ve been through, personally, that I don't usually go around in public talking about. I wanted them to know how infuriating it all was, how it felt like I was banging my head against a brick wall.

But I had stepped over the line. Dr. Kane appeared nonplussed by it all, remaining silent as I slumped and shrugged helplessly, my voice returning to its usual stutter. "I'm s-sorry. I-I need —"

The words got stuck in my mouth and I was only embarrassng myself further — face hot, I suddenly stood up, yanking my hand from Mom's and making a beeline for the door, wrenching it open. As I wiped at my face, I left the office, making a sharp turn left down the hall, all the way to the end, coming to a stop at the window. Like Dr. Kane's office, it reached from the floor to the ceiling, a narrow view of a city almost too big to imagine.

I forced down the lump in my throat, refusing to let the burning in my eyes overwhelm me. I hated crying in front of people, but at least I managed to do it away from an audience this time.

Behind me, I could hear Mom's voice echo softly. "I'm so sorry about that. I'm sure Mia doesn't
mean it, she's usually much more reserved..."

Dr. Kane's response, a little fainter. "It's okay, Ms. Fletcher. I've had worse confrontations, trust me...she's just a teenager, and this isn't easy for anyone..."

To distract myself, to think about anything other than right now, I looked out the window, took in the city. Cold gray buildings, shimmering wet under an even colder and oppressive sky. The distant rumble of thunder could be heard over the air conditioning in the clinic. Pressing my forehead to the cool glass, speckled with rain water, I let my breathing even out. My glasses clinked against the surface and I took them off, wiping away the stray tears that leaked out.

I angled my face down, my breath fogging the glass, trying to see beyond the floor to the space beyond — nothing but thin air between me and the pavement, with only a piece of glass acting as a barrier. It felt so close, I got vertigo, and almost pulled away. But I didn't — the feeling was also exhilarating, and it erased every other thought in my head.

I pressed my hand against the glass, as if I could move it out of the way. If I forgot about the rest of the world, would it feel like I was flying?

The truth came to me, even as I tried to push it away. No. People like me weren't meant to fly.

Sighing, I let my arms fall to my sides, heavy, like a pair of invisible weights were tied to my wrists. I carried them, shoulders hunched, as I shuffled back to Dr. Kane's office.

She and Mom were in the midst of another conversation. Dr. Kane was handing Mom a brochure, explaining: "...other options you can look into. Stem cell research seems viable; Stark Industries has made surprising advancements in the medical field —"

Stark? That name stuck out in my mind. Tony Stark. The world of billionaires and superheroes seemed like a fantasy right now. I had a hard time conceiving that there were other problems in the world, the kind that might threaten the country's existence. Here I was, just a sick girl trying to hang on, and they were out there, kicking bad guy butt and saving the day. How could it ever touch my life, even in such a small way?

Dr. Kane continued as my mind grappled with the concept. "— With stem cell technology, we can take Mia's DNA and grow her new kidneys — automatically a perfect match, by definition — with minimal risk. 3-D printing has also proved greatly useful in biomedicine, another option to consider — we can create a personalized heart pump that could ease the stress of Mia's hypertension, and allow her body to recuperate with no detrimental effects..."

Her voice faded into a soft drone in the back of my mind as I lost interest with the topic. It didn't matter if stem cell technology could save my life. It didn't matter that Stark could change my DNA and turn me into Super Woman with his Eugenics 2.0 or whatever he called it.

Considering he'd been just recently attacked by some weird Russian escaped convict with electro-whips, I wasn't hopping on the hype train for Stark anytime soon. How could I trust this guy to help save my life when he could barely save his own hide?

None of it mattered, because in the end my mom would still be drowning in debt — even more so than now. Even if I dedicated my life to the sciences, crafted a successful and lucrative career for myself, tried to pay off the debt, Mom would be stuck living under it for years to come. She'd still have to wait tables, long hours underpaid, while I had to trudge through the rest of high school, and at least eight years of university before I could start changing anything.
No matter the options, it wasn't fast enough. Not good enough. How could my mom last another, what, a decade or more of this kind of life? We were barely scraping by as it was.

"You still have some good years ahead of you, Mia," Dr. Kane's voice jarred me out of my reverie. She gave me a long look, serious, as though she could tell I didn't want to listen. "I estimated that your kidneys will continue to function for the foreseeable future — or any of your other organs, for that matter. I still stand by that. It's not over for you. So, try to make the best of it."

I could only return the encouragement with a strained smile. I didn't have to heart to say in front of Mom that I didn't believe a single word Dr. Kane said.
Chapter Four

Try to make the best of it?

Is that what you say to someone who you think has plenty of time to enjoy themselves?

"Mia? Earth to Mia!" a hand waved in front of my face. "Hey, Space Cadet, you there?"

"W-what?" I jerked my head back, blinking in surprise. My eyes refocused on the textbook in front of me, the papers scattered around on the carpet. Peter leaned into my line of sight, raising his eyebrows at me, and I rubbed my face, embarrassed. "Oh, uh, sorry. Just...thinking."

"Again?" Peter sniffed, pulling back and typing something on his calculator, then writing the answer down on his worksheet. "You know, if you keep doing that, people might think you're one of those crazy independent thinkers. Had this been two hundred years ago, you'd be put in a mental asylum."

I frowned at him. That was not one of Peter's better jokes. "...Thanks. I-I guess."

Peter seemed to realize I wasn't taking to his humor, and set down his pencil, the smile sliding off his face. "Is something wrong?"

"N-no."

"Was it that doctor's visit?"

"No." I repeated, getting annoyed. "I'm f-fine. Stop asking."

Peter looked unconvinced, and I just knew he was going to persist. I flinched when he opened his mouth to argue the point, but before he could say anything, a voice called from the kitchen: "Peter! Can you come help me with the casserole?"

"Coming, Aunt May!" he got up with a huff, trotting out of the living room and into the kitchen, brightly lit and alive with chatter. Mom and Uncle Ben were catching up around some beers as Aunt May added her own two cents while wielding a sauce-laden spatula.
I didn't know what started the tradition of going to Peter's apartment in Queens, but up until right about now I really liked it. And this was a nice neighborhood (and, subjectively, miles away from Frederick Douglass), not filled with gunshots and police sirens like Hell's Kitchen was.

Peter and I always camped out in the living room, usually watching TV when we did our homework, our stuff scattered across the couch, coffee table, and floor. We agreed that after we finished, we'd used Peter's computer — an ancient Commodore 68 — and try to see who got further on The Oregon Trail. Ben said he'd give five dollars to the winner, and even if he was just joking, there was a little tension now between me and Peter.

Uncle Ben was just your ordinary auto mechanic at the local repair shop. It meant his hands were nearly always covered in grease, and he wasn't allowed to wear work pants on the nice couch, or Aunt May would complain. So instead he'd sit at the table and share horror stories from work with my mom, who had plenty of her own. He was a few years older than her, blond hair just starting to gray at the temples.

Aunt May was the type of woman who'd fit in perfectly with socialites, had she been given the chance. She always looked her best, dark hair coiffed and lipstick applied just right, even after hours working as a bank teller downtown. Her never-ending font of optimism seemed to have rubbed off on Peter over the years, as well as the cleanliness; something I'd probably appreciate more if my mood wasn't as dark as it was right now.

The smell of dinner cooking made me salivate, and I battled with my own resentment to get up and join the rest of them. My pride won out, and I remained seated, glowering at this history essay that just did not want to work itself out. Maybe it'd be better if I tried typing it; surely Peter would let me use his computer for this, if I could temper through the 'are you okay' questions a few more times.

Dr. Kane's words still rang in my head, and I gripped my pencil, frustrated. It just felt all wrong, and yet here everyone was, talking, laughing, having a good time. Like everything was going to be all right. Why couldn't I see that, too?

Like I wasn't already distracted enough. The talk with Mr. Barchard earlier this week still bugged me, although he hadn't broached the subject with me again...although now Michelle kept poking at the subject, like the time she sat with me during lunch (a surprise, since I usually sat on my own if Peter wasn't there), and we had a lively discussion about the recent political scandal with President Ellis before I realized what she was doing.

Michelle never said such a thing out loud, of course. And I wasn't dumb enough to point it out.

I wasn't sure if I was even angry at this point, because at the time, it had been fun. Michelle Jones had just walked right up to me, sat down, and started talking like it was just so normal. I felt normal. Like she wasn't abandoning her usual habit for me that day, that she was there because she enjoyed it, too.

I didn't know what to feel. I wanted to talk to someone about it, Mom maybe, but I was pretty sure I already knew what her answer was. Go join a club, then — it might be fun! Besides, you need to get out more, or something along those lines. I didn't have time to join clubs. What if I got sick again? What if I didn’t get into Midtown? I needed to focus on that more.

"Hey, kiddo," a voice brought me out of my reverie, and I looked up to see Uncle Ben standing over me, hands in his pockets and a kind smile on his face. He was tall, had a day's worth of beard, and wore wire-frame spectacles — I think it was a Parker staple to wear glasses. "We called you for dinner. Aren't you hungry?"
"Um, n-not really," I said, biting my lip. Doctor's visits tended to kill my appetite. I didn't want to make him concerned, though, so I added, "I j-just want to get this, uh, essay f-finished first."

"Well, I can't see how you can work on an empty stomach," Ben pointed out, that mischievous sparkle in his eye just like Peter did when they knew I was bluffing. Peter may not be Uncle Ben's son, but he might as well be, since I had no idea where else he got it from. "Come on, I promise you the casserole's good. It's got the Official Parker Seal of Guaranteed Taste." He put his thumb and index finger together and winked at me.

I smiled weakly at that, but just looked down on my homework again. Uncle Ben must've known it wasn't just the food, because he sighed and sat down next to me, grunting with the effort. "Your mom told me about the doctor's visit. She's optimistic, but from the sound of it, you're…not."

I just sniffed, keeping my gaze on my homework. I considered lying again, but instead what came out was: "It just feels kind of, um, p-pointless, really. N-nothing's happening. Nothing's g-going to happen."

"Really? Because your mom talked about that 3-D-organ-whatever stuff. I dunno, I think Peter understood it better than I did, but then again, he's decades ahead of us quadragenarians — Peter said that earlier, four-dollar word right there — but I think it'll work out. Just you wait."

Yeah, if I had that kind of time. I was going to say something, maybe sarcastic because I was feeling particularly bitter this evening, or maybe go the better route and just agree for the sake of ending this conversation, but Uncle Ben surprised me when he reached for my notebook, which I had cast aside so I wouldn't get distracted. "What the heck is this? An evil Latin chant?"

I let out a startled laugh despite myself. Picking up my head, I glanced over at the pages and pages of writing, in ink and pencil, that I had scrawled in endless lines through the notebook Uncle Ben was now flipping through. His eyebrows climbed up on his head, and I said, "It's j-just coding. You know, for, uh, computers?"

"Oh, pff," Ben just shook his head, putting the notebook back down. "Looks like a bunch of baloney to me. I don't know how you kids get this kind of stuff. At least you're following in old Rick's footsteps instead of mine or your mother's…you've got a lot of potential, you two. You and Peter are going to change the world, I just know it."

Rick. Richard Parker. Pete's dad. A man I've never met, but the only person in our family (so far) who graduated university, had a Ph.D. Sometimes Mom or Ben talked about him and Peter's mom sometimes, so I knew a little about them. A perfectly normal family before they died in a plane crash. Peter never really talked about it, either. Maybe it bothered him, or maybe it didn't and he just never felt the need to discuss them. Either way, I didn't go out of my way to bring them up in a conversation.

That made me smile, though, a genuine one this time, even if it felt short-lived. I'd be happy if I achieved half as much as Richard Parker with what time I had left.

About an hour later, I found myself sitting at Peter's computer, transcribing the latest additions of my notebook onto the black screen. Peter's room was a mess, as per usual, stepping over clothes scattered across the floor, textbooks and loose paper just lying everywhere. Even his bed was a mess, like he'd been doing homework there earlier.

The room was cramped, not much room aside from the desk and bed, and whatever shelving could fit on the walls. A single, narrow window occasionally shed light in the morning before the Sun passed to the other side of the building. There was, however, a little hatch in the ceiling — an attic of
sorts, that no one else used. Inside was maybe a small space, four square feet of storage space, since not much else could fit in there besides boxes. It was handy, considering Peter's closet was full no matter how clean the room was.

I didn't think he'd mind me breaking into his room. It's not a crime if it's family, right?

Right now, I just wanted to get away from the chatter for a little bit. Mom, Aunt May, and Uncle Ben were talking grown-up things like bills and coworkers and politics, none of which I was particularly interested in. And okay, I was kind of avoiding Peter, too, mostly because I was afraid he'd press the issue of my current emotional state.

…Which, obviously, wasn't that great at the moment.

But the task of putting my handwritten work into a processor was relaxing — even if it took forever for the Commodore to boot up — and set my mind in a meditative state where all I saw were numbers and commands, green letters on a black screen. No other thought could invade or distract me when I was coding. It was entirely self-taught and honestly not very good; I knew basic Linux and HTML and not much else. I could barely make a functioning webpage.

But it was fun; learning and typing the little lines of numbers and symbols and phrases made me feel like I was a spy writing in secret messages. It actually didn’t interfere with my dyslexia too much; reading code wasn’t the same as reading regular English, and copying down what I’d already written streamlined the process. And besides, I was only going to get better with practice.

In fact, I was so focused that I hadn't heard footsteps coming up the stairs, and was caught completely off guard when something bumped in next to me.

"Watcha doin', platypus?" Peter asked, sliding in on his swivel chair and spinning around. He was eating a banana, as if he didn't just have a massive plate of food for dinner.

"I dunno, what does it look like?" I muttered, glancing at him in irritation. I had to pull on the edge of the desk to bring myself back, and slapped Peter's hand away when he tried to type something in.

My hands were small, and Peter's keyboard looked ginormous in comparison. It seemed like I had to move twice as much just to get the same amount of work done. "No touch! How are you st-still hungry?"

"Hey, I'm a growing boy, I'm allowed to eat," he said around a mouthful, throwing me a disgruntled look. "And you put in a colon instead of a semi-colon. Just sayin'."

"Oh." I flushed, embarrassed, and made the edit. "T-thanks."

"You know, you could always take this one, if you want," Peter offered. "I've been saving up for another computer, a better one, you know, something made after the 90's."

I paused, frowned, then said, "Th-thanks, but I-I don't need you to h-help me. What I've g-got is fine."

"Well, if you say so," Peter said, although he didn't sound convinced. I didn't say that I would totally die to have a computer of my own — I just didn't want one from him. I didn't want a pity gift. "Oh, hey, I almost forgot. Ben wants us in his office."

"Oh?" I frowned, then lifted myself out of his computer seat. "I-Is something wrong?"

"I dunno," Peter shrugged, then gestured with his head. "C'mon, let's find out."
In the office just off the hallway, Uncle Ben was waiting for us at his desk. Aunt May and Mom were in the living room, chatting over glasses of wine. If there was something wrong, they didn't seem concerned.

Uncle Ben's office was small but neat. On the wall near the window were shelves of perfectly crafted model airplanes, next to some family photos. May, Peter, Ben and his siblings when they were young. Offhand, I wondered, had I been healthy, if I would've looked more like my mom when she was thirteen. But her eyes weren't gray, her jawline was softer, and her nose stronger. Maybe those things came from my dad.

His desk was littered with thick car manuals, spreadsheets, bills. Yellow wood shavings were everywhere. Uncle Ben liked do things by hand, with a calculator and a #2 pencil. His math was always right, and the bills always paid on time. I admired that part about Uncle Ben. He didn't rely on technology or computer programs to do the work for him. He trusted himself to get everything right on his own.

"Hey, you two," Ben looked up when we entered, smiling. That's when I noticed one of his model airplanes, a B-12, in pieces across his desk. Following my gaze, Ben chuckled, "I was, uh, wondering if you could help me with this. I need your small hands — my fingers are too big and slow for all these little pieces…"

Building model airplanes was a hobby of Uncle Ben's, something he often did with Peter ever since he was small. He didn't really need an excuse for our help, I knew Peter would jump at the chance to play with the pieces. I'd never been invited, though. I always figured it was just their thing. Besides, my fingers trembled too much to be of use.

But I put on a brave face and smiled, as the three of us hunkered down on the floor, desk lamp angled overhead, blue instruction sheets spread out between us as Uncle Ben passed the plastic frameworks around.

I did what I could with what fine motor skills I had. Of the three of us, Peter was the best, putting together the tiny pieces without messing up. Ben cursed under his breath and shook his hand when he accidentally superglued two fingers together. I remained very still as I held two pieces of the hull and Peter joined them together.

Meanwhile, we talked amiably — Uncle Ben leading the conversation. I didn't think much of this; mostly it was just about how school was going, if band practice was interesting, or an update on Ned's latest shenanigans.

"So, Peter, care to regale us with how you got that black eye?" Uncle Ben asked, eyebrows raised. He had a half-smile, to show he wasn't accusing or angry.

Peter's first reaction was to look at me — an unspoken question: did I tell Uncle Ben? But I just shrugged and shook my head helplessly. I had no idea what Uncle Ben knew, or how he caught on that Peter's original excuse (dodgeball to the face) was a lie.

Peter, still embarrassed, ducked his head, scratched behind his ear. "Oh, uh, it was just a stupid fight with Flash. We both got detention for two days. That's all."

"Uh-huh," Ben said, a combination of amused and un convinced. He glanced at me and winked. "Just a stupid fight. Is that the same fight that broke your glasses?"

"What?" Peter's hand flew to his face. His glasses were unmarked.
"You think I can't tell when you're wearing your back-up glasses?" Uncle Ben said, cocking an eyebrow. Even I was impressed. All of Peter's glasses looked the same. I hadn't noticed he switched them out. "Sounds like this kid Flash owes you a new pair of glasses."

"I'm sure he can afford it," Peter shrugged, but his expression was downcast. "His ego, though, probably not."

"S-Strickland also t-took his camera," I added.

"What?" Uncle Ben eyes went wide with surprise.

"Goose!" Peter hissed, jabbing me with his heel. "Not cool!"

"How did that happen?" Uncle Ben demanded, now focusing Peter with a more concerned look, peering at him over his glasses. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"Flash grabbed it. Strickland saw us fighting and took it away," Peter admitted, giving me one last disgruntled look before facing Uncle Ben. I knew he didn't want to tell Ben because that meant Ben would get too involved. "It's not a big deal, I swear. I'll get it back."

"When?"

Peter paused. "Uh...sooner or later."

"Hm," Uncle Ben sat back, pursing his lips thoughtfully. "Maybe I should have a talk with this Mr. Strickland. Has he always picked on you?"

"Who? Flash or Strickland?"

"Strickland," Ben clarified. "Don't tell me he's that bald son of a bitch who cancelled that band recital one time over spilled soda?"

Peter and I burst into astonished giggles at the unexpected slander, and it took Peter a second to recover. "Uh, yeah, that's him."

"Maybe I should try talking to him," Uncle Ben said. "You know, smooth things over. Stupid fight or not, that man has no right taking your property, Peter."

"Please, don't," Peter winced, shaking his head. "Strickland hates me enough as it is. I already tried asking for it back and he almost gave me another detention. I-I don't want to make things worse..."

"Well, what else are you going to do, Peter?" Uncle Ben asked, frowning. "Sounds to me like Strickland's either keeping your camera, or he's going to forget. I know he's a teacher, but it's worth it to try and stand up to him. Stand up for yourself. Don't worry if he threatens you with detention — I'm here, and I've got your back in case that man does anything unreasonable."

"I don't know..." Peter still seemed unconvinced.

Perhaps sensing that he needed back-up, Uncle Ben turned to me. "Well, what do you think, Mia?"

I blinked, caught off guard. I didn't realize my opinion was important here. "I, uh, I g-guess it's worth a-a t-try. Strickland's a j-jerk. He's n-not even a real t-t-teacher. Although, I th-think going to Principal R-Rooney would b-be less sc-scary..."

"See? Look at that," Uncle Ben held out his hand to me as he spoke to Peter. "A reasonable suggestion. The Principal's a good guy, right? He's saner than Strickland at least. Maybe you should
go talk to him about your camera."

The thought of approaching the Principal seemed to be even more intimidating than Strickland, if the look on Peter’s face was anything to go by. He just twiddled with one of the plane’s little wheels, muttering to himself. "Maybe, I don’t know…"

"Well, whatever you choose to do, I’ll support you, champ," Uncle Ben said, clapping Peter on the shoulder. "You’re a good kid, you’ll figure this out."

Peter nodded sullenly, then glanced at me. I saw that sparkle of mischief and knew something bad was going to happen, right before he said, "Mia’s made a new friend. Michelle, right?"

I glared at him. Wow, excellent way to both change the conversation and divert attention off him. This was probably payback for bringing up the camera.

"Really?" Uncle Ben fell for it, turning to me with an expression akin to impressed. "Who’s Michelle? I didn’t know you hung out with anyone besides this chucklehead.” He added with a thumb to Peter, who ducked his head, eyes hidden behind his glasses.

"Y-yeah," I answered, trying not to sound like I wanted to kill Peter. Why did he bring that up? "I mean, m-maybe, I don’t know. We only really t-talked…twice. But she’s n-nice. I guess. We b-both like History a lot. She’s b-better a-at art, though."

"Well, that’s interesting," Uncle Ben said, nodding. "Not gonna lie, I think your mom will be relieved to know you’re not just hanging out with boys all the time."

I groaned inwardly. “Only two. And she’s not worried about Ned.”

Uncle Ben chuckled. “Well, maybe not in the way you’re thinking of. So, is this Michelle also going to Midtown?"

"I d-don’t know. We haven’t talked about it. I don’t think she did early testing like we did.” I left out the part where she seemed like the person who’d probably drop out of school to backpack in the mountains of Peru. High school absolutely did not seem like Michelle’s style. “Probably w-won’t know her th-that l-long, anyways."

"Ah," Ben raised his chin. He knew, without asking, that I meant my stutter, how embarrassed I was by it. "Well, you’ll never know until you try. Maybe this Michelle is a great friend. Just give her a chance."

"M-maybe,” I said, staying noncommittal. I didn't want to get his hopes up. I didn't want to fool myself into thinking it was a good idea; did I really want to be friends with Michelle? If anything, I'd be doing it for them, and not myself.

I wasn't sure if that was enough.

✮✮✮

The trip home was a silent one.
Well, not silent silent. The subway was a cacophony of noises; chattering passerby, clacking footsteps, churning machinery, street musicians and their shrill instruments, unintelligible PA voice, the screeching of train wheels, all echoing off the concrete walls, filling the space between me and Mom as we sat on the bench, waiting for the H-Train. We were dripping from the dash to the station, and Mom tapped her yellow umbrella against her foot.

Minutes passed, and I pretended nothing was wrong.

Then we both spoke at the same time.

Mom said, "It's going to be okay —"

"Why didn't you graduate college?" I blurted.

Mom blinked at me, surprised. "— What?"

"W-why…” I stuttered, nearly lost my gumpiont when I realized how rude I sounded. Like I was blaming her. What kind of horrible person said something like that? I winced, then muttered, "Oh, n-never mind. For-Forget it."

"No, no, it's fine," Mom sighed, just waving her hand. I couldn't believe it when I saw her smile a little. "I always wondered when we'd talk about this — although I thought I'd be the one bringing it up, not you."

"What? Why?"

"Well, you know. You're always so quiet. You don't like prying into other people's business," Mom said, then paused, and cast me a mildly suspicious look. "As far as I know." She nuded me on the arm, smiling again to show she was teasing. "Anyways. I was in a bad place at the time. I was young, pregnant, working, and in nursing school at the same time. It was just…I did my best. I wanted to graduate. I certainly didn't want to turn waitressing into a career. It all changed —"

"When I was b-born, I know."

"Honey bee," Mom gave me a sympathetic look, reaching to pet my head and tuck a stray lock behind my ear. "I don't blame you for this. Honestly, the worst thing that could've happened is if I lost you. That was the only thing I could think of at the time. I was scared. Imagine waking up in the middle of the night, your water broke and bleeding everywhere. I knew it was too soon. Babies born before thirty weeks rarely survived.

"But you did," Mom added, peering down at me. She tapped the frames of my glasses with her fingernail. "You came into this world fighting, Mia. You were born with barely enough blood to fill a wine glass, but you made it through, against all odds. You're always going to be my brave little girl, you know that?"

"B-but I'm so…so small. I-I get sick all the time." My voice shook. My birth had only been a small hint of how much of my life I'd be really spending in hospitals. "How does that make me — make me brave?"

"Because you're a fighter, Mia. You've got that spirit in you." Mom chuckled a little, looking more tired than ever. "Hell knows I needed it, too. I remember when you got pneumonia the first time, when you were seven, and instead of sleeping or watching TV, you just asked me if you missed anything at school. You wanted your homework! I couldn't believe it at the time. I lied to you, said I didn't have any."
"Mom! I missed a month of school because of that! I was so behind!"

She laughed when I punched her, but there was no ire in it. She raised her hands in surrender, admitting, "I know, I know! And it still didn't stop you! I had to buy the new Harry Potter book to keep you busy, because you didn't want to do anything else. I wanted to read it to you, I didn't think you were ready for chapter books on your own — but then I came back from the cafeteria and I found you already half-way through Chapter One."

"I d-didn't like you r-reading it. You k-kept saying Hermione's n-name wrong."

"What? No, I didn't!"

"Yes, you did! Y-you kept saying Her-Me-Oh-Nee, w-when it's Her-My-Oh-Nee."

"Oh, please. Like you would've known that at seven years old."

We fell into laughter as a distant whirring filled the air, quickly getting louder and louder before rising to a shriek. A blast of wind swept over us, making me cough a little, and Mom wrapped her arm around me, bringing close in a one-sided hug. "Come on, honey bee, let's get you home before you get another one of those nasty colds, okay?"

Mom didn't let go of me when she escorted me onto the subway, as if she was afraid I might freeze to death, or maybe even float away if she didn't hold me down. I didn't mind so much, since I was feeling a little sleepy anyways. It had been a long day, and my stomach was full from casserole. It was Mom's recipe, and by far one of the best things I've ever had. Maybe I was a little biased, but Mom's cooking skills were an undiscovered wonder of the world. My own love of honey on waffles inspired her favorite term of endearment for me. I guess food was a big thing for us.

Her favorite yellow umbrella provided cover from the shower as we exited the station fifteen minutes later. It was a bit of a long walk to our apartment in Hell's Kitchen; it was five blocks away, and I wasn't exactly a fast walker. Mom was brisk, though, as the night got darker and the rain got colder.

I kept falling behind, and cold water kept slipping in under the collar of my coat. Mom reached back, linking her arm with mine, and tucked me under the shield of the umbrella. It seemed to glow above us, a neon halo that provided the only warm color in streets filled with dark, unfriendly brick buildings and lonely cars rumbling by.

I was a little more than wet by the time we finally reached our building; it was run-down, with a peeling façade, bars on the lower windows, and a front light that never stopped flickering even when you changed the bulb. And although we were safe from the rain once inside, we still had a ten-floor climb to make — the elevator stopped working last December, and the landlord, Mr. Manfredi, hadn't found anyone to fix it yet. Or perhaps decided it was cheaper not to.

I had to take it easy on those steps. As tired as I was already, I had to take it even slower. Mom didn't complain, not once, when I had to take a break for the third time, on the seventh floor, so my heart could stop pounding and I didn't feel like I was going to pass out at any second, before we could keep going. Instead, she promised me hot chocolate and a warm bath, before heading me off straight to bed. I should get as much rest as I could.

Only I couldn't.

I found myself lying awake, staring at my ceiling what was maybe an hour later, long after Mom herself had tucked me into bed (despite my complaints) and gone to sleep herself.

Dim light filtered in through my window. It pattered with rain, a soft drone that was both incessant
yet soothing. At least it muffled out the more annoying sounds of the city, like the car honking and the drunken ruckus from the bar down the street.

Pale yellowish-green light filtered into my room, casting stark shadows across the walls. My room was small, but packed. I had a bookshelf filled to the brim, books crammed in every which way until there was no more room left. On top of it were even more books, a quaint white jewelry box (with a ballerina that spun around to music you opened the lid), and a spelling bee trophy from Fifth Grade. There were doodles of stars on the walls, and a small shelf of Mom’s 80’s and 90’s mixtapes I found a few years ago. They were old and a little scratchy, but I liked listening to them, thinking of a time before I was born.

My desk was neatly organized, aside from the pile of notebooks on and around it. School notes, homework, and personal projects, all categorized by color so I could find it again if I had to. I didn't have much choice, since we didn't own a computer to do the organizing for us.

I stared at the black velvet sky outside my window, my mind filled with nothing, yet unable to rest. Buried under four blankets and more comfortable than I could ever imagine, I felt like I should do something, but anything I did would be inappropriate at this time of night. I didn't want to wake Mom up, and I didn't want to be tired for the next morning.

Still, I was restless.

I turned my gaze up at the fairy lights that hung over my bed, that I once found in a dollar store. Not terribly pretty, they were just pieces of colored fabric around Christmas lights, but at night they gave my room a sense of whimsy. They made me feel comfortable when the weather was unforgiving, and were thus my favorite part about my room.

This time, unfortunately, it wasn't working.

My bones ached, yet my muscles were numb. I couldn't make myself move even if I wanted to. I closed my eyes, willing myself to sleep, to ignore this strange urge of need. I felt too big in a body too small, skin stretched so tight it itched sometimes.

To be honest, it was probably the doctor's visit that was doing this to me. Hell, who could get over that sort of thing so soon? Dr. Kane's words still rang in my head. I couldn't help but wonder how much time I had left. Whether or not Mom will outlive me, on the simple fact alone that she didn’t get sick as much as I did. That the odds weren't totally stacked against her.

But the concept itself was so terrifying, so incomprehensible to me, that I couldn't cling to it. Maybe it was because I was a teenager, and like all teenagers I thought I was invincible. And yet, it didn't feel true. I didn't feel invincible. I got hurt plenty. I was highly aware that the wrong gust of wind blowing in just the right direction might do me in, once and for all.

Starting to regret even considering the subject, I reached out from under the warmth of my covers to grab Stitch, and pulled him under. The air in the apartment was always cold, due to the building’s faulty heating system and Mr. Manfredi’s laziness, and even in the springtime I was shivering at night.

Was I too old to be cuddling with a stuffed animal? Maybe. Did I care? No. Stitch was my favorite, a present from Peter when I was nine (Lilo & Stitch was our favorite movie growing up), and the little blue alien always made me feel better, especially when I was feeling particularly irrational, like right now. So I was going to hug him until my arms hurt.

But there was nothing I could do about that.
Still, I felt something change in me that night. Eventually, I drifted to sleep, still wondering on the notion of what it could mean.

✮✮✮

The next morning, I found out what it meant.

I woke up with a sniffle, which in three days evolved into repeated sneezing and a stuffed nose, before a full-on cough and sore throat that made me feel like I want to die.

So far, Mom couldn’t call it anything more than a bug, which was lucky. I hadn’t been too sick aside from mild nausea, hadn’t thrown up, and hadn’t broken out in hives or anything else nasty. For the next week and a half, I just felt gross and a nuisance to everyone else, spreading germs and disease everywhere.

Apparently, my body had been trying to tell me I was just being sick again. Surprise, surprise.

"All right, class, can you tell me what these four figures have in common?" Mrs. Burges' voice broke me out of my Dayquil-induced reverie, and I had to refocus my eyes on the bright images of the projector, nearly painful in the dark classroom.

On the slide were four different paintings, all dated somewhere between 1800 and 1900; two were landscapes, the other half Civil War propaganda, and each featured a woman: fair-haired, rosy-cheeked, with variations of the Phrygian cap and chiton, seemingly made of the American flag. I hadn’t been paying attention up until this point, so the best I could do was look like I was really interested — which probably did the exactly opposite of me blending in, since the kid to my right was sleeping.

No one raised their hand or spoke up. This wasn't unusual — U.S. Art History was kind of a niche topic, and we were nowhere near the post-modern age, or post-post-modern or whatever the hell art period Millennials were in now.

I was only in here because I needed the art credit, since actual art class was already full before I could join. Another lovely side effect of missing random weeks of school.

If anyone thought it was a problem, they didn’t say anything. Michelle had chatted with me in History class as if I’d been there the whole time (she got an A on her essay about Werner Von Braun, Nazi-rocket-scientist-turned-NASA-architect — I did equally well on my topic, Virginia Hall, American spy behind German lines). She didn’t ask how I was doing, and part of me wanted to be a little offended, but at the same time, I was grateful. She was the only person who didn’t ask “Are you feeling okay?” every goddamn hour. It was a relief not to lie and make excuses around her.

The only real problem was that I still hadn’t gotten any letter from Midtown yet. Every day after school I’d ask mom if anything came in the mail. Everyday she’d just shake her head and tell me “Maybe tomorrow, honey.”
Ned got his yesterday. I was starting to get nervous.

Mrs. Burges sighed. I wondered if she hated her job, or maybe just this class in particular. She didn’t even bother calling on someone and making them suffer through an answer they didn’t know. "These women were dressed like this because they’re the personification of America, as noted by the Stars and Stripes pattern of their robes, and the Phrygian cap, which as we learned from last chapter, is a symbol of freedom borrowed from other cultures in Europe. Can anyone supply a modern example of Columbia, one you might see every day?" Mrs. Burges paused for a second, like this was supposed to be an obvious question. When she got no answers, Mrs. Burges prompted encouragingly: "Like, say, when you take the ferry to a certain island?"

"Oh!" a boy shot his hand in the air. "Statue of Liberty!"

"Correct, Jason!" Mrs. Burges said, for the first time sounding pleased. "Of course, our lady Columbia fell out of favor after the 1800s, and her male counterpart, Uncle Sam, is better known. He came into being during the War of 1812..."

I started to drift again, although not on purpose. Honestly, the cough medicine I was on just made me want to keel over and fall asleep for a month; instead, I figured I'd just close my eyes, only to come to again to find myself staring at a different slide — this time staring at what I assumed was another image of Columbia, this time alongside a poster of Uncle Sam.

"Now, can someone tell me the thematic differences of these two images? What they represent to Americans today?" Mrs. Burges asked.

"Uncle Sam's kind of like the government, right?" a girl said.

"Nowadays, yes — Uncle Sam, in common parlance, is synonymous with America’s military and government force, while Columbia is seen much more as a mythical being, a sort of ‘goddess’ of liberty, an embodiment of the spirit of America as a whole. While images of her vary, sometimes bearing a flag, or a shield, or even weaponry, she is depicted as a more protective, defensive figure, a voice of the people, than the aggressive Uncle Sam, a symbol of the government. What are some propaganda symbols that we use today?"

Someone suggested: "Does Captain America count?"

"Well, now, that's a different topic all together," Mrs. Burges said. "Captain America is an interesting case; you see, the Super Soldier project that he originated from was only meant to be used as propaganda, to strike fear in the Axis, but of course, Captain America used his mantle and his abilities in a more proactive way, and became not just a symbol, but an active fighting force for the Allies during World War Two..."

I could feel the fog clouding my mind again, and didn't try to fight it. I slumped in my seat, propping my chin on one hand and hoping the glare of the projector's light on my glasses would hide the fact that my eyes were closed. I didn't open them again until the bell shocked me out of a soft, fuzzy dream.

I once more made the perilous journey between classroom and locker — mine was a floor up from Mrs. Burges class, and I nearly got wiped out by a stampede of kids heading to lunch. That would've been my first destination, too, had I not been carrying a bag full of heavy textbooks I no longer needed.

I tried to be quick about it. My movements were sluggish thanks to the cold, and not only was I tired, but I was hungry, and I was hoping there wasn't something nausea-inducing at lunch; I'd hate to have
to skip a meal, but I wanted to at least put some mashed potatoes or some juice into my stomach.

On the way to the cafeteria, I once more paused in front of the acceptance board, noticing a new name on the list.

Michelle Jones. Midtown School of Science and Technology.

My heart skipped a beat. Holy shit, Michelle got into Midtown? I had no idea she even applied. Or that she was — well, I knew she was smart enough, but for Midtown?

“Hey, Mia!” And like the Devil Himself, Michelle appeared out of the crowd, standing next to me by the board. She glanced at the names before meeting my gaze. “You get your letter yet? That loser kept talking about how all three of you were going to Midtown.”

“No, n-not yet,” I said, mood instantly soured at the reminder. Still, my curiosity beat my bitterness, and I tilted my head. “I d-didn’t know you w-were interested in Midtown. Seems less…I dunno, artsy th-than you’d w-want, Michelle.”

“I passed the audition for LaGuardia, too, but I don’t know if I want to put all my chips in that,” Michelle shrugged, nonchalant as ever. She puffed a curl out of her face, looking utterly bored. “Midtown has science and art, and I think I’ll get a more well-rounded experience from it. I think my mom is disappointed, though. Wants me to be the next Picasso or something. I hate painting.”

I didn’t know that but I nodded along, pretending I completely understood.

“And I thought I’d immortalize the expression of existential dread you had on your face in History class today.”

“Oh my God why.”

Michelle just shrugged, closing the notebook again. I was still reeling from the realistic impression of my gaunt face in charcoal. “I dunno. You have an especially dead inside look when you’re dying of the cold.”

“Oh. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome!” she gave me a wicked grin, tucking the sketchbook under her arm and skipping off. “I’ll save you a seat at lunch!”

Chapter End Notes

I hope Amelia’s stutter isn’t too annoying. It’s a part of her character, obviously, but I don’t want to become so distracting it takes you out of the story. It’s not always consistent, though, since stutterer’s tend to stop stuttering when they’re yelling/angry, or when singing or reciting. It has to do with impulse and planning, I believe.

EDIT 7/11/17: Removed any last vestiges of the Amazing Spider-Man in this chapter, including the mystery about Pete’s dad. Everything should be in line with the Homecoming movie one this edit is finished across all chapters.
Peter had always been a bit of an erratic gumball, but this was new.

The major event, of course, had to happen when I wasn't there.

Where was I? Home, curled around the toilet, trying to hold in my chicken noodle soup.

I wasn't exactly clear on the details, but I was there when the phone rang, and heard maybe 37% of the actual conversation. I could hear Mom's gasps, her "No! Peter? Really?" in that way mother's do when they hear atrocious news about good people. Then, when that was over, she came over and told me that Peter had detention for two weeks; he was lucky it wasn't worse (whatever it was that he did), since his record so far had shown that this behavior was so unlike him that the principal decided to let him off just this once with detention.

I didn't have a cell phone, so I couldn't keep updated through texts — otherwise I would've asked Ned or Michelle to fill me in. At least lying in bed gave me time to think about what's up with Peter. I doubt things would go better for him if he kept this up. Breaking and entering into a teacher's office? I had only been joking when I suggested it, I didn't think he'd take it seriously. Going to Principal Rooney was definitely my better idea.

"Maybe he's going through a phase," Mom pondered as she stroked my back, pulling away my hair as I took slow sips of water from a cup. It was the only thing I could digest at the moment; warm water kind of had a funny taste to it, but it eased my sore throat. "All good kids go through their rebellious streak at some point, right? I didn't think it'd be this, er, wild, though. Peter's never really broken anything, has he?"

"A-aside from a, uh, beaker or two?" I managed to choke out. A year ago, Peter almost set fire to the chem lab when he accidentally knocked over a Bunsen burner into a puddle of methyl alcohol — a situation remedied fast enough (by slamming a metal bowl over it) that he was never caught, and something we promised not to tell anyone, ever. "N-not really."

Still, that was just clumsiness. What Peter did today — that was deliberate.

Maybe he took Uncle Ben's advice of standing up for himself a little too…enthusiastically.

At this point, sometime midafternoon, I was feeling a little better, which meant I rest in bed, away from the toilet without feeling the dire urge to hurl again. Mom made the "official" diagnosis and prescribed me an evening spent inside, sipping water-diluted Gatorade and nibbling on saltines; if I could manage it, also have some of her chicken noodle soup again, and crossed my fingers that it stays down this time.

While Mom remained cheery, wrapping me tight in blankets and reminding me to take my usual medication, I could see the pinch in her brow, her pursing lips; how careful she was, trying not to show too much worry. Colds were one thing, flus were another. Colds knocked me down for a day or two — a flu or virus could keep me down for a week, maybe more, and ravage my immune
system for the following months while I recovered. It was a delicate balancing game of being sick, but not too sick, and wondering where to draw the line between home remedies and a visit to the doctor.

"It's just another stomach virus," she said, as she dumped cough drops into a sugar bowl like they were candies and set them by the bed. "Just your typical thing. It'll be gone in a few days, just you wait."

She was usually right, so I didn’t question it; privately, though, I wondered if Mom ever doubted herself. What was she worried about this time? It had actually been warm today, and I leaned next to the window in my worn bean bag, staring up at the still-blue sky outside. I could hear kids laughing the streets; school was out and everyone was taking advantage of the nice weather. Mom wasn't even wearing shoes, walking around on the hardwood floor in her bare feet.

Usually, I'd be jealous, but right now I just wanted to close my eyes and drift. I’d hoped to see Peter, maybe ask him to get my homework, but he probably had other things to worry about right now.

Also, Mom had made it clear that Aunt May had grounded Peter; on no uncertain terms was he allowed anywhere in the city between school and home for the remainder of the century. So, there's that.

I couldn't even remember the last time Peter got grounded. Aunt May was of course the deciding factor in all of this, since she didn't take shit from anyone, but even then, Peter usually didn't get into that much trouble. The last time he got grounded was maybe from forgetting to answer a phone call or sleeping on the train and ending up really late coming home.

There came a knock on my window. I didn't look around right away. It took another knock for me to remember that I was on the tenth floor of my building, so who the hell was at my window?

I whirled around in the bean bag, nearly falling out when I saw none other than Peter crouched on the fire escape right outside. Catching myself on the floor, I scrambled up and opened the window. I did it slowly, afraid the noise might alert Mom. Considering the state I was in, I felt like I was doing something illegal.

"Peter!" I hissed, still unable to believe my eyes.

"Hi." He grinned at me.

"Hi yourself, what are you doing?" I demanded, peering over my shoulder. The door was cracked open. What if Mom heard us talking? "H-how did you even get up here?"

"I climbed, obviously," he replied with a shrug, as if it made total sense. That was still ten floors of fire escape ladders to get up. How was that not a big deal? "This was the only way I could reach you without her knowing. Ben and May won't be home until late. So, no one will know! Besides, I've got your homework."

"And you're not seeing the p-problem in that?" I asked, crouching down on the floor as if that somehow made me sneakier. I couldn’t believe he'd go to this extent for me. I tried pushing Peter off of the window sill, but his big ol' butt was firmly planted there. Instead, I ended up with an armful of papers. "Maverick, you're grounded! You have to go, before you get us both in trouble!"

As if on cue, Mom called down the hall, "Mia, I'm going to be gone for the night, okay?"

"W-What?" I almost didn't catch what she said. I turned around as I heard footsteps; Peter jumped off the window, ducking out of sight just as the door opened.
I dropped my homework like they were hot coals. I had hoped to look innocent, just sitting by the window, chin propped on my hand, eyebrows too far up my head, but Mom wasn't fooled. Her hands were busy putting up her hair. She fixed me an odd look, "Why is the window open?"

"Uh," I scrambled for a good excuse, and came up with: "Just, uh, g-getting some fresh air. It's, um, r-really stuffy i-in here."

Mom frowned, but she didn't seem too suspicious. Then again, could she really guess that Peter was outside, just out of sight? He had never done something so risky before. I mean, he'd been doing that lately, toeing the line, but this was new. "Well, all right, then, but don't let it stay open for too long. When the sun sets, it's going to get cold, and I can barely pay the heating bill as it is."

"W-wait, w-where are you g-going?" I said, sitting up straighter. What could she possibly be doing at this time? What about supper?

"Back to the diner," Mom sighed, running a hand through her hair. "Donna called in sick, so Bob wants me to fill her shift."

"But you — you already worked t-two shifts t-today."

"I know, honey bee," Mom sighed, giving me a weary smile as she walked over. She wrapped me up in a hug; I fit easily into her arms. I could smell her shampoo and perfume, and a sense of comfort and safety wafted over me. "But I have to go. There's no one else to do it. Besides, we could do with the extra cash."

"When w-will y-you be back?"

"Not until after midnight. Bob let me have the morning shift off tomorrow," Mom stepped back, ruffling my hair. "I'll make you breakfast."

"Y-you don't h-have to do that, Mom," I said, reproachful. The night shift at the diner went until 3:00 AM and I had to get to school by 8:00 (if I was even well enough to go), so I had to be out the door an hour earlier to catch the bus. That wouldn't be enough sleep, at least not for me. "I-I-I can just have cereal l-like always and—and you can sleep in."

"That's sweet, Mia, but I think I can handle it," Mom was already stepping out of the room. She paused at the door, resting her hand on the knob. "There's leftover meatloaf in the fridge, and some cake if you want it. Get some meat on those bones, girl."

"Thanks, Mom," I grumbled, managing a half-hearted wave as she disappeared down the hall. A minute later I heard the door slam and waited until I heard distance footsteps echoing down stairs before finally relaxing.

"Hey," a punch in the shoulder made me look around. Peter popped up again, fixing me with a curious look. It just hit me that he had heard our entire conversation, and I wondered if he'd say anything on it. I hoped not; my face was already flushing at the thought. But he said the last thing I expected. "Let's get out of here."

"W-what?" I asked, standing up. Peter rose with me, and I could see a look flickering in his eyes; he may not have mentioned the previous conversation, but I could tell he was still thinking about it. That maybe it bothered him for some reason. "I-I can't leave. J-just look at m-me. I-I'm sick."

"Yeah, so? C'mon, it'll be fine." Peter waved an arm down. "Hedy's gone to work. You'll be back way before she'll be. She won't even know you've been gone."
"I don't know," I said, rubbing my arm. I couldn't just leave, could I? It wasn't that easy. Being sick was bad enough, I had no idea how much worse it would get if I was caught doing the exact thing I wasn't supposed to be doing; bed-ridden and with Mom angry at me? No thanks. Mom might never let me out on my own again until I was twenty. "It might not be a good idea for me right now."

Peter just stared at me, his expression turning soft. He leaned in through the window, taking me by the shoulders and said, "Hey. I promise you won't get hurt, okay, Goose? I would never let that happen."

I just snorted, giving him a weird look. "Y-you, Peter Parker, c-can protect me fr-from a mugger? What-what are you going to do, r-recite the p-periodic table at him?"

"Oh, ha-ha, you're hilarious," Peter rolled his eyes, quiet earnest giving way to beleaguered sarcasm. He dropped away, backing out onto the fire escape. He swung from the stair railing, giving me his best puppy-dog look I've ever seen. "So, are you coming or not?"

Dammit. I didn't have Aunt May's fortitude. "Ugh, fine. B-but only what h-happened when you b-broke in-into Mr. Strickland's office."

"Deal."

✮✮✮

"You think Liz will notice me next year?" Peter asked, apparently a thought that had been bugging him if the silence so far had been any indication.

We had been sitting at the café in a corner booth and had previously been talking about school, Iron Man, the upcoming 2010 World Expo, and an assortment of other topics. Jingly music played from the jukebox, while other customer chatted quietly on the red bar stools next to the counter. If we were dressed in poodle skirts and leather jackets, we'd look like a scene from a cheesy 50's movie.

I glanced up at Peter over my milkshake, taking a sip. He seemed legitimately concerned. "W-well, you c-can always try and use your d-dorky charm when you see her next."

"I'm not dorky." He sniffed.

"Uh, you're pretty d-dorky, Peter. You are th-the definition of dorky." I held up a finger. "If you looked up 'dorky' in the d-dictionary, there w-would be a picture of your f-face right —"

He brought up his hand and pushed mine to the table. "Oh, shut up. Fine, I'm dorky, I accept that. There's nothing wrong with dorky."

"Of course n-not. Y-You wear it well." I was about to go on, maybe boost his ego a little more because why the hell not — But I was interrupted by a sudden coughing spell. It last for a good half minute, and when it was over, I was a little out of breath, dizzy. Withdrawing my elbow shielding my mouth, I could feel something warm drip down my face.

"Whoa, hey, take it easy." Peter leaned forward, his smile disappearing instantly. He reached over for the napkin dispenser and grabbed a handful before handing them to me. "Your nose is bleeding, Mia."
He sounded calm, even though bleeding noses wasn't exactly normal. It'd happened before, but not this strongly. Then again, my nasal track had been pretty sore lately, so I wasn't surprised that something dried up and cracked, bleeding. I took the napkins and pressed them to my face, pulling back once to observe the wet, red stains. "Huh."

Peter sat back in his seat, frowning. He seemed concerned with my lack of reaction. "Are you okay? I knew you were sick, but I didn't know how badly. Is it the flu again? You got your vaccines last year, right?"

"N-no, I was too sick, the doctor thought my immune system wouldn't handle it," I said, bringing the napkins to my face again. At least this didn't hurt. "But I've b-been having congestion p-problems and other stuff. Mom th-thinks it's just a-a stomach bug. I'll be f-fine."

"Maybe we should go home," Peter suggested, and I could tell from the tone of his voice that he was little freaked out. As if the concern on his face wasn't already a dead giveaway. "This was a bad idea. I shouldn't have brought you out here."

"Oh, r-relax. I'm a b-big girl, I knew w-what I-I was doing," I muttered, hoping the bleeding would stop before I got home. If Mom saw this, then she was calling the doctor straight away, and I didn't want to put us through that strain again. "I-I made my c-choice. And I-I'm having fun. It's fine. Let's j-just finish our f-food."

"Are you sure?" Peter's eyebrows pinched upwards.

"Yes, I'm sure. L-look," I pulled down the napkins, seeing the blood flow had already stopped. "I'm not even b-bleeding anymore. I-I just look l-like a mess."

"I'll get some water," Peter seemed determined to fix the situation, though, and I couldn't convince him to not get out his seat and get a glass of plain water. I just sighed, slumping in my seat and going back to my smoothie. The back of my throat felt a little thick because of the nosebleed, but otherwise nothing had changed.

Peter came back a second later, and I dipped fresh napkins into the glass, using it to clean the blood off my face. I checked my reflection in the window, before turning back to Peter with a smile. "S-see? Good as new. Y-You worry too much."

He didn't look entirely convinced, but let the matter drop. "Well, if you say so. I still think you should go home, soon. In case, you know, there's an accident."

"I-I'm not a-a doll, Peter. I'm not g-going to break or g-get lost if I'm out for t-too long."

Unfortunately, we ended up leaving shortly afterwards. We had been out for only a couple hours; I hadn't even wanted to go in the first place, and now here I was, dreading home. I guess I wanted out more than I thought.

Meanwhile, Peter practically had to drag me home. The sun was already starting to set. We hadn't walked too far away from my apartment; Peter seemed tempted to reenter using the fire escape again, but there was no need, since no one was there and climbing the stairs was easier for me. Also, less terrifying.

We took our sweet time, with Peter constantly checking on me, as if I might collapse at any moment. I had to shake him off for the third time, on the fourth floor, saying, "Peter, for the last t-time, I'm f-fine. It was j-just a little n-nosebleed. I-I can make it to my f-floor on my own."

"Sorry, sorry," he mumbled, stuffing his hands into his pockets. Peter was nervous, but also
withdrawn; he was thinking about something, something hard, something that bothered him. I thought about prompting him, asking what was up, but couldn't figure out how I wanted to say it. By the time we reached the next floor, Peter had beaten me to it.

I wasn't expecting it, either, when he suddenly blurted, "Do you ever miss your dad?"

"I — what?" I did a double-take, pausing on the steps to throw him a funny look. Peter rubbed his face with his sleeve, looking quite unsure himself. "N-No. Not really. I've n-never even met him."

"Oh, no, I meant —" He grimaced. "Do you ever wish you knew him?"

I just snorted. "Why does it m-matter? I-I'ts not like h-he's coming back."

But the look on Peter's face, the hard press of his lips, his hunched shoulders, said that my answer was important to him. He just gave me a long, hard look, and I bit my lip, reconsidered. "…Well, I-I mean, I guess. I-I don't know. He d-ditched Mom as soon as she learned she w-was p-pregnant. J-Just walked right off the f-face of the earth. She d-didn't even know u-until later that he l-lied about e-everything. His n-name, his a-address. S-So no, I-I don't really want to know a guy like that."

"Even if he's your father?"

"He certainly didn't care," I retorted, anger tingling my voice. Why was Peter pressing this? "My mom w-was so upset she-she burned all her pictures of him. She won't even t-tell me the name he gave her. A-all I know is th-that he was from Brooklyn…but h-he probably lied a-about that, too. She doesn't w-want to find him, and she d-doesn't want me to f-find him, either. Why? Why do you care?"

"I don't know." Peter just shrugged, turning away from me to scowl at the floor. He continued up the steps on his own, and it took me a moment before I followed him. "Sometimes I just wonder how things would be different if, you know, everyone was here. Our family, I mean. Your dad. My parents."

"I-I-I think the one we have is p-perfectly fine."

"You don't think you're missing out?" Peter fixed me with a disbelieving look over his shoulder. "You don't think that there's some possible world, a better world, where you have everyone, and they're there for you, and they know everything about you? That they can be proud of you?"

Mom was proud of me plenty, I didn't need anyone else's approval. I just scowled, but the feeling of anger abated when I realized what was really going on. It took me a moment to find the right words, and we climbed almost another floor before I could say them.

"It's o-okay to miss your p-parents, Peter."

He started to protest. "It's not about me —"

"Peter, I-I love my mom. I love y-you, and-and Aunt May, and Uncle Ben. I w-wouldn't change that f-for the world. It's n-never bothered me that my d-ad i-isn't here, because I never n-needed him. What I have is-is enough. Y-You-You're enough. It's not worth t-time th-thinking about what m-might've been, what'll n-never happen. It's just…the p-past. It's over. W-we have w-what we have."

He heaved a long sigh out his nose, leaning heavily against the banister, perhaps accepting defeat. I came to a stop next to him, and we stood there for a moment, and I let him think. Peter rested his head against the wall, staring off into the distance. His voice was soft, almost hoarse. "You don't think we might've had a better life?"
I frowned. Was he talking about me, how sick I was? How it might've been easier, how I might be healthy, if Mom wasn't single and working on her own? That Peter might be living in a nicer home, with well-off, mildly famous parents? That we wouldn't be two loners growing up together in a world that only got stranger and stranger as time went on?

Maybe it was all that, and more. I didn't even know if I should be angry, upset, sad, or all three. I wanted to tell him it didn't matter, but it clearly did to Peter.

I had to be frank. "P-probably, yeah. But th-then you'd be a-a different Peter, a-a-and I'd be a different Mia. A-and I like you th-the way you are r-right now. Why, d-do you want th-things to be different? D-do you want that p-perfect world?"

"Sometimes," Peter shrugged, turning his head slightly to look at me, still appearing discontent. He pushed off the wall, started moving again. "Everything just feels so…wrong, sometimes. Imperfect. And I wish I could fix it. Make it better."

"D-do you think I'm im-imperfect?" My jaw tensed, and I wasn't sure I even wanted to say that, but it was too late. Is that what Peter meant? Was he unhappy with the way I was? Did he wish I was something, someone different?

"I — no." Peter hesitated, backpedaled. But I could see the panic in his eyes, the realization of what he just said. "I mean, it's just — it's difficult, sometimes. And it shouldn't be. Not for you."

"I c-can handle d-difficult," I said, terse. "I've b-been handling it all my life."

"So, you're telling me," Peter asked, looking skeptical. "That not once, not once in your entire life, you wished it didn't have to be this way. That this life doesn't slow you down, that it doesn't make you feel like, that you feel like…"

He couldn't finish the sentence, maybe didn't have the guts, but I understood him nonetheless. I grit my teeth; I didn't like Peter questioning my opinion, and I liked even less that he had a point. That he was right.

I hated it. I hated being called out for being a hypocrite. I hated that he was right, that I was ungrateful, that I wanted something better, even though I already had more than I could ask for. That I didn't appreciate everything my mom, Peter, everyone has done for me, because of me, because of the way I was, and I just wanted a world that was easier for me to live in.

It was like a pounding in my head, that anger and resentment. It wasn't even at Peter, who provoked it. It was at myself.

"Y-yes." I admitted after a long silence, climbing up those stairs. We were almost to the top. Although my words were shaky, my voice was cold. "Yeah. S-sometimes I wish I-I wasn't this way. Sometimes it's too hard. Sometimes I feel like I'm just a-a burden, that everyone who sees me just—just sees some sick little girl who—who can't take care of herself. I've never felt big, or-or strong, or anything like that. Sometimes I-I hate that I don't have it."

I could feel Peter's eyes on me, the surprise, but I couldn't meet his gaze. My hands were fists and my steps were sharp and hard. He came to a stop at the tenth-floor landing, bring up a hand to stop me. "Mia, I-I'm sorry, I didn't —"

"Whatever," I shook him off, making a beeline towards my door. I could hear Peter follow slowly behind me, him having lost his energy, while I burned.

I struggled with the lock, before it finally gave. In my frustration, I swung it open, didn't even stop as
I stormed in.

Until I saw Mom, waiting for me with crossed arms in the living room.

She did not look happy. "I was wondering where you were."
“I don’t need to be fixed.”
"So, it turns out Bob hired a new waitress, and I didn't have to stay as long as I thought." Mom started out, lightly as though telling a funny story. "And I come home, thinking it'd just be another easy night, heating up some noodles and making sure Mia gets better. Only, lo and behold, I come in and find the place completely empty, with no note, no message, nothing to tell me where my sick daughter might've gone to in the spare hours I was gone."

She glared at me. "Care to explain yourself?"

Peter immediately jumped to my rescue. "It's not her fault, it was my idea, I just wanted —"

Mom didn't give him time to finish. Instead, she jabbed a finger in his direction. "And you are supposed to be home with my brother and his wife. What the hell were you two thinking, walking around Hell's Kitchen at this time? It's not safe when it gets dark."

She directed this last part at me. "I thought you knew better."

I knew I should've been ashamed. Embarrassed. Apologizing. But I didn't, and I wasn't going to. Instead, I just glared at a corner of the room, hunched up my shoulders and said again, "Whatever."

Mom blinked, caught off guard. She exchanged looks with Peter, but I didn't check to see what it could be. She just huffed, planted her fists on her hips. "Whatever? That's all you have to say, after deliberately disobeying me? I told you to stay inside, Mia. You're too sick to be out there. It's too dangerous. What were you thinking?"

"N-not gonna make m-much of a difference." I muttered, shuffling past her. I was in trouble, and for some reason I didn't care. Why the hell didn't I care? But it was the truth; it just didn't bother me like it should. If this happened maybe yesterday, I might've been crying, entirely upset with myself. But now, I just felt heavy. My heart was a useless, rocky lump in my chest. My fingernails dug into my palms, but it didn't hurt. The pounding in my head continued, dull but constant.

"Excuse me?" Mom pivoted on the spot as I just passed her. I expected she tried to stop me, but she didn't, just continued to gape as I wandered slowly into the kitchen, opening the fridge. "What is that supposed to mean?"
Then, to what I assume was at Peter, she added, "What happened? Where did you two go?"

I didn’t see anything I wanted in the fridge. I’d completely lost my appetite — I just didn’t want to meet anyone’s gaze. As it was, something drew my attention, and I looked down.

A piece of white paper, sticking out from beneath the fridge. I bent down and pulled it out. A letter.

Not just any letter. A letter from Midtown. My eyes scanned the addressee three times just to make sure my dyslexia wasn’t fooling me.

My heart launched into my throat. It must have fallen off the pile this morning when Mom got the mail.

"We just went to get some ice cream," Peter sounded like I should have. Regretful, wincing, easier tone. He wanted to be helpful. I didn't know why. He wasn't very good at it. "Well, smoothie, really, b-but that's not the point. I, uh…we had an argument, coming here."

With shaky fingers and pounding head, I ripped through the letter while Mom and Peter continued talking. I felt woozy, lop-sided, like the whole world was going to fall over any minute. This was it. This was it.

"About what?" Mom asked.

I opened the flap, pulled out the folded paper. Stared at the black printed words on the blinding white page. Breath hitching. The message piecing together bit by bit. I couldn’t move. The letters started blurring into each other, and I squeezed my eyes shut and slammed it onto the counter. I wasn't trying to be hard, but it was loud nonetheless.

I snapped, "About the fact that I'm just a sick little girl who no one wants to deal with, and there's nothing I can do to change that."

Okay, so that wasn't the total truth, but the bile in my throat wouldn't allow anything else out. And it was pleasing to speak without a stutter, even if it only happened when I was angry. At least then, they'd take me seriously. It was better than succumbing to the tears starting to burn behind my eyes.

I could still see the envelope, the words, taunting me out of the corner of my eye.

September 20th, 2010

Dear Amelia Fletcher,

Thank you for your interest in Midtown School of Science and Technology. Our admissions committee has considered your application and unfortunately, we are unable to offer you a place at the School at this time…

Mom's voice was soft, almost a gasp. "What?"

Peter choked, utterly alarmed. He threw up his arms, shaking his head. "What? No, no, that's not what I said. I never said that! We just, we were just talking about what our lives could've been. About my parents. A-about her dad."

"Why in the world would you ever bring that up?" Mom demanded, and I felt her gaze on me, even though I still hadn't looked up. I refused to, and just reached for a glass on the shelf, as though this were just another evening, completely normal, not taking place in the middle of a boiling fight.
Hearing their reactions, I was satisfied, but deep in my gut I felt regret. Why would I say that? It was so cruel, and it wasn't even true. Well, not completely true. It was what I felt, which at the moment was apparently trying to rip everyone else apart as I slowly collapsed in on myself. Years and years of stress and pain and endless waiting, finally cracking my framework, the walls I built up, all crumbling down in one final blow.

And it was such a relief to finally let go.

"Mia?" Mom's voice broke me out of my reverie again. Her voice was sharp, reproachful. "Amelia Fletcher, what is going on? Why are you suddenly being like this? The both of you! Suddenly, you're just acting out, starting fights, getting into trouble, saying the worst things! What happened to the Mia and Peter I knew?"

I just snorted, muttered under my breath. "Dead."

"Amelia!" Mom scolded.

Peter just sighed. Even though I wasn't facing him, I could imagine just how he'd run his hand through his hair, tired. "It's nothing, it's fine, I was just trying to have some fun — I didn't think it'd turn out this bad, or-or that school would get kind of crazy —"

“Oh, don’t bother, Peter,” I suddenly interrupted him, spinning around. I hadn't been listening to the last of Peter's sentence, simply because another thought had occurred to me. A thought that made my blood boil. Peter halted, face falling, hurt. I smothered the regret building in my gut. “It doesn’t matter anyways."

It was then I finally understood Mr. Barchard’s words. The Midtown letter had revealed the truth. I had no impact. No worth. Nothing to leave behind. The only thing special about me was the same thing holding me back, killing me. And I’d let it. I’d let it dominate and I had no idea until now that I had already lost.

God, I was pathetic. Even Michelle, weird girl extraordinaire, a loner with even less friends than me, had greater prospects, had left deeper significance at Frederick Douglass Middle School than I ever had. Teachers would dread each year for when the next Michelle arrived. She had the gifts of an artist and insight of a slightly nihilistic philosopher. She didn’t even care and she was better than me.

They were all better than me.

And I hadn’t even bothered to try.

“W-what do you mean?” Peter asked, brow furrowing together. I turned away from the counter, the letter — and them — pressing my palm to my forehead to ease the ache. “Mia, don’t — c’mon, look at me, please? I’m sorry, okay? I didn’t mean those things. It came out all wrong. You’re fine the way you are."

“What things?” Mom asked, frowning and planting her hands on her hips. She sounded accusing. “What did you say to her?”

Peter flushed with guilt, but I didn’t care as I crossed the tile floor to grab a glass from a cupboard. I decided I was thirsty after all. Actually, I was parched. My tongue was dry and stuck to the roof of my mouth, sticky and thick.

“He said I was imperfect,” I said, and the cup hit the counter with a thud.
“What?” Mom sounded aghast. “Peter!”

“No! No, that’s not how it went!” Peter stammered, rushing to the island as if he could somehow plead to my better nature. Too late. It was long gone. “Mia, you know I didn’t mean it like that! I just meant — I was asking if she ever thought of having a better life, you know, not sick all the time. That’s it! I just...you know, foot in mouth.”

I glanced over my shoulder as Mom heaved a sigh, clearly not surprised with Peter’s ability to hamstring his own attempts at compassion. She pinched the bridge of her nose, almost muttering, “And how did this conversation come up?”

“Doesn’t matter,” I interjected, not wanting to bring up my father. Already a touchy subject with mom, I definitely wasn’t in the mood to be talking about him either. The combined emotions would not lead to any positive developments. I went to the sink and filled the glass, taking a long drink before continuing, “The point is, Peter doesn’t think I can take care of myself. Probably never will.”

“Mia —” Peter intoned, aggrieved, but stopped himself. I turned around, frowning in confusion, to see Peter’s gaze distracted, downwards at the counter. At the letter.

My fingers around the glass went cold.

The surprise on his face was apparent. Clearly, he hadn’t expected the rejection any more than I had. Then the sadness when the realization dawned on him; we couldn’t attend Midtown together. At least, not yet. Then, frustration, as I had only made the situation worse.

My heart beat faster as I watched the emotions play across his face. Mom, oblivious, said, “Mia, I’m sure that’s not what Peter meant. You know we’re all just very protective of you.”

“Yeah,” Peter said, at length. His gaze slowly drew to mine, and in that held moment, both of us understood exactly what had led to this. The letter had ripped me to shreds and he was seconds away from exposing it.

Instead, Peter offered a tiny, sad smile. “It’s our jobs.”

I blinked, caught off guard. Peter left the letter where it was, didn’t point it out to Mom, who was still focused on me. I didn’t get it. Why didn’t he mention it? It’d put him on the high ground, prove to Mom I was emotionally compromised, lashing out irrationally, hurt by rejection and taking it out on them. I was self-aware enough to realize it.

The water did nothing to wet my tongue. My throat felt even rawer. Peter wasn’t going to say anything. He wasn’t going to use the letter against me.

A pulse of anger made my face flare red hot. How dare he.

"Why? B-b-because I can’t help myself?” I demanded, slamming my fist on the counter, rattling the glass. "Why, was I just-too-too pitiful to look at anymore, just sitting all alone in the back of class, no friends, no life? Are you going to fix me, Peter?”

"No, no, I don’t pity you, Mia.” Peter said, looking pained at the word. I couldn’t tell if it was guilt or embarrassment. "And I don’t want to fix you! I just — I meant that life sucks sometimes, okay! Not all the time, but you know, its noticeable! You got pissed because I pointed it out, then you acted like you wanted this all along!”
"You don't know that!"

Mom tried to interrupt. “Whoa, hey, kids —"

"Why would I think differently?" Peter's voice rose alongside mine, speaking right over Mom's attempts to calm us down. "You never want to talk about it! How am I supposed to know how you feel about it? And you hate it when people tell you what to do, even if they're just trying to help!"

"Th-that's not true," I said, my voice shaking, a little intimidated by how angry he was. We had never had a fight like this before, and I rarely heard Peter yell with such...pain and resentment. A part of me just wanted to run, hide, and pretend this never happened. I didn't have the emotional strength to deal with all of this right now. On top of it all, I knew it was a lie, and I caught the gleam in Peter's eye, that he knew it, too.

He should've taken advantage of it, rip the truth right out of me, payback for what I've already said. But he didn't. Instead, Peter took a deep breath, evened his voice, said, "I know what I did was stupid. That I could've said it better. But why can't you just talk about it sometimes?"

"About what, dying?"

"I don’t mean it like that!" Peter retorted, looking increasingly annoyed. Like he knew I was being difficult on purpose. “It’s not that dramatic! You’re just sick a lot. And the dyslexia, your bad writing, it doesn’t stop you. Yeah, it makes life hard, but so do plenty of other things. But as soon as someone tries to help you, you blow it off like some sort of, I don’t know, insult!"

“I do not!"

"Yes, it is. You can’t even work together with people because it’s like your Kryptonite. Computer Club, Drama class, Chess Team," Peter listed off, all things in the past I tried once (or maybe not at all), before deciding it wasn't for me. "You backed out of the science fair in the sixth grade after your guidance counselor said it would boost your application. You once failed a project on purpose, because another kid on your team was bossing you around. Why are you like this, Mia? Is it really that hard? It's like you're giving up on purpose."

The disappointment was palpable in his voice, his eyes — and the fact that he stopped yelling, was willing himself to stay calm. And those last words, there was more weight to them. Peter was talking about the letter. He already knew I had given up. The results of the letter had surprised him, but in truth, my reaction was the worst. He knew I was better than this.

And it just made me angrier.

"Because I'm tired!" I shouted, my shoulders shaking with the effort as tears sprung in my eyes. I hadn't been ready for that level of critique, and I hated that Peter was right — he was right about that, too, dammit!

The pounding in my head was so strong, I could feel it all the way through my body, down to my toes. It made it hard to concentrate, and I barely registered the surprise on Mom and Peter's faces. Instead, I coughed, trembled, went on. "I'm tired of acting like I've got something to prove! Of having to make the best of things! Like I’m constantly missing out on every important moment in my own life. I don't want to pretend I'm something I'm not, just because no one is happy with the way I am! Hell, I'm not happy, but I'm not going to pretend that everything's all right, anymore. Nothing's all right! It never was!"

My voice cracked at the end of my rant, and I fell back into coughing again, my throat grating like
someone was sticking knives into my chest. I turned away from them, leaned into the counter as I caught my breath.

"Y-you're not happy?" Peter said after a long moment, making me look back up at him. He tried to approach, but the look Mom was giving him said we were both walking on thin ice.

"Peter, why would do you that?" came her beleaguered sigh, her fingers rubbing her temples. I wasn't sure if she even heard what I said. "I know you meant well, but —"

"Why didn't you ever say anything?" Peter spoke right over her, frowning at me. He looked hurt, almost betrayed. Like I'd broken our promise of not telling lies or keeping secrets. Hm, maybe I had. I was being mean on purpose, we both knew it. Just minutes ago, I was telling him how much I cared, how much I loved this family.

And here I was, trying to tear it down.

"Because I didn't — I didn't want to worry you," I admitted, voice hoarse. I had lost some of my steam, mostly due to the sickness wearing me down.

And saying something like that made me feel like I was just exposing myself, being too vulnerable. I didn't exactly like talking about my feelings, but at least when I was angry I felt righteous. This just felt too sorry. I felt powerless.

"Oh, honey bee," I heard Mom say, pained and sympathetic in that way mom's do when their children are sad. I heard her footsteps, hands on my back, a hug. "You don't have to hide things from us. Your happiness is important —"

Almost immediately after her saying that, I recoiled, pushing away from her. "Is that why you never said anything?"

Mom just stood there, her arms hanging, bereft. "What do you mean?"

I think she already knew, but for the benefit of Peter, I said, "D-do you r-remember when I got double pneumonia at nine-years-old? When I-I was at the hospital f-for almost a month?"

Peter just shrugged. "Um, yeah. I think it was the longest you've ever been there. It was when I got you Stitch."

Him saying that tempered me a bit, remembering the way a younger Peter had pushed the toy into my arms, said he missed me at school; but I could see Mom starting to bristle. She definitely knew where I was going with this. So, I kept my gaze focused on her. "D-did Mom t-tell you the d-doctor's diagnosis? Y-you know, aside from me being sick?"

"Mia, don't." Her warning was low.

"Don't what?" I retorted, throwing a hand at Peter. "Don't you think he deserves to know? I mean, we already do. A-and I bet Uncle Ben and Aunt May do, too."

"Don't know what?" Peter frowned, looking completely at a loss. It probably didn't help I was speaking on his behalf, when only moments ago we were fighting each other. This switch around wasn't too easy on me — I was partly just doing it out of bitterness, not for Peter, but for myself, for vindication. "Mia, what're you talking about?"

Mom scowled at me. My chest starting to rise and fall a little faster. The onset of another asthma attack? I forgot I never even told Mom what happened at the skatepark. Or maybe I was going to
cry. I couldn't really tell, since the pounding in my head was getting louder, and every breath seemed to burn in my lungs. I raised my eyebrows, a challenge. "W-well? Tell him."

She closed her eyes, almost a wince. There was a silence as we waited, and I was almost afraid Mom wouldn't do it, or maybe she'd lie — but instead, she took a deep breath and spoke very slowly. "According to those doctors, Mia doesn't have a lot of time left."

That was her diplomatic voice, her way of keeping the situation calm. Phrasing it in a way that didn't sound scary. Peter, likewise, didn't seem too surprised, just more confused. "H-how much time?"

Mom just closed her mouth. So, I replied, voice cold. "I'm probably going to die before I'm thirty."

"Amelia, that's enough," Mom said, raising a hand as though she were about to usher me away. "You need to go to bed."

"No!" I swiped her hand away, turned to Peter. His face was a mask of horror, pale and frozen. I wondered if he had ever thought about it, how I might die, because I certainly did. All the time.

"That's why I'm tired! Why bother, right? Why do I-I have to live through that kind of existence, a-always wondering what's going to happen to me. 'Cuz let's be honest, there's no way I'm getting b-better any time soon. W-what are the chances that my life is going to turn around before the clock runs out? Who knows, it c-could be tomorrow, next week, next month —"

I wanted to keep going, but I pushed myself too far at that point, and the next attempt to open my mouth only led to fit of coughing. I hunched against the counter, pressing my face into my arm as my body wracked, and I could hear Mom sigh through her teeth. I could hear Peter breathing, a little too rapid. They were both silent for a very long time.

It was all over now. I said what I wanted to say. I was kind of disappointed; I wanted this to last longer, I wanted my anger to really burn. But nope, that was it.

And it all came crashing down on me, finally.

I shuddered as the last cough left my lungs, and I slumped against the counter, taking a second to catch my breath. The numbness that so blissfully allowed me to vent all of my pent-up feelings was suddenly gone, like a drug fading off. And I felt it. The regret. The sadness. The fact that I was so happy to hurt them, and they didn't deserve it, and what the hell was I thinking, I was in so much trouble, why would I say any of that…

"Peter," Mom's voice eventually broke the silence. Her voice was even, not quite firm, but a solid force in my head. "I think you should go home."

I didn't even realize I had started to cry until I heard her, and immediately I wanted to run to her and hug her, but it felt wrong after what I said. Why would she want to hug me, anyways?

"No," I almost couldn't believe it when I heard him disagree, and I dared glance up from the cover of my arms. He stood there, as he had minutes ago, unmoving. But instead of looking hunched, afraid, cowed, Peter looked determined, with shoulders back and chin high. "No, I want to stay."

"I'm not going to argue on this, I need you to —" Mom was interrupted when I started coughing again, and this time I felt a hand on my back, arms bringing me up to a slightly less limp position. I was having a hard time standing. My head continued to pound, so loud it was almost hard to hear Mom's next words as she propped me up. "Mia needs sleep. She's tired, she's sick…and she needs time to think. We all do."
"No," I shifted away from her again, my throat protesting at every word I said. I knew I should stop talking. I knew she was right. I was just being contrary now. "N-no, I don't want your help. W-what does it matter, a-anyways? I-I'm just going t-to die, anyways."

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" Mom snapped, making me flinch a little. Apparently, her patience had finally run out. "Mia, for the love of God, do you honestly think I'd let you die before me? Dr. Kane knows what she's doing, and I swear, if I hear another word out of your mouth, you're not going anywhere for a very long —"

I didn't hear the rest of it because I started to choke.

My immediate instinct was to spit out the clogging substance, which I did. Warm, wet, into my hand, more past my lips. I tried to swipe it back, but my tongue recoiled at the taste.

"Mia?" Peter was the first one to notice that I seemed to be having trouble. I felt a hand on my arm, glanced up. There was worry in his eyes, in that face I've known since I was four, a face I trusted more than almost anyone else. "Are you okay?"

"I'm…" I drew my hand away from my mouth, head spinning. The pounding, the world swaying. I couldn't focus on Peter's face, or why Mom suddenly gasped, came towards me. I stumbled back, almost losing my balance.

I caught myself against the counter, my hand still held up, warm. I didn't understand the panic on their faces. Not until Peter said, "Oh my god, Mia, your mouth —"

I looked down at my hand.

Blood. Dazzling, beautiful red painting my hand, my sleeve, down my shirt.

I opened my mouth. Maybe a scream? No. Awe. Fear. Curiosity. It filled my throat, I coughed, gagged, couldn't get rid of it. My heart skipped a beat, panic suddenly gripping me. This was bad. This was so bad. I should've known something was wrong when I got the nosebleed. I should've said something. I should've told Mom about the asthma attack. Was this related? Had I made it worse, not telling Mom?

It was deep, welling up from inside. I could feel it. A pain in my chest. In my lungs. Like with pneumonia, a heavy wetness that didn't belong in the same place I breathed. Only it didn't go away like pneumonia did. It got worse. Each breath I took brought up more and more.

Until I couldn't breathe anymore.

And that was when I knew I should say something.

The world moved too slow around me. I tried to call out for Mom, but my voice was trapped underneath the blood, and it just kept coming. I tried to cover my mouth, to stop it, but Mom grabbed my hand, pulled it away. I didn't know why. Her voice was a ringing bell in my head, too loud and completely unintelligible.

And there was Peter. Just standing there, shaking his head, saying words, his lips moving, but I couldn't hear anything. Nothing but my erratic heartbeat, my racing thoughts, the shuddering breath in my lungs, trying to get out. I coughed, and the blood bubbled on my lips.

I reached out, helpless. I didn't know for who, but someone took my hand. It should've been reassuring. Only now I felt fear. Only now, I didn't know what to do.
This was it. I knew I needed no other confirmation when I saw their faces over mine, shouting at me. A strange calmness washed over me, a certainty that made me forget why I should be scared. I wanted to tell them it was going to be okay. I wanted to say that I'd get over this, like everything else.

But I wouldn’t.

Not this time.

"Peter." *Help me.* I tried to say it, but I could only manage his name. The important part, at least. I had to tell him, because otherwise he wouldn't do it. But my voice could barely break through the mess in my mouth. *Fix me. Save me.*

And I was already falling.
Chapter Seven

Chapter Summary

The End // Pearl Jam
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PqAP5ZA2Lkg

Chapter Seven

✮

Sirens.


Mom's face, stricken. Peter, clinging to me. Pushed away, hands I didn't recognize.

A fight. Peter struggling against two men in blue coats. He was strong, he shoved one off. I reached out for him, but could barely move my arm. *Come on, Peter, please. Don't leave me.*

He was getting too far. Running. Not fast enough. Screeching tires, doors slamming, dark night sky blinded out.

"— Low blood pressure, in and out of consciousness. Brain hemorrhage? No, we've also got bleeding in the lungs. Something collapsed. I have no goddamn clue—"

In and out. Images. Sometimes sound. Crying. Me? Mom? Peter? I tried to sit up, to understand what was wrong. But I couldn't. Something was holding me down. Straps. I blinked, and the inside of the apartment was replaced by bright lights, white metal walls, cabinets of medicine, tools.

Ambulance. Rumbling, screeching, rocking.

Mom's face, over mine again. Another man, pressing something to my face. I tried to push it away, but Mom had my hands. Her grip bruised. I tried to tell her it hurt.

I couldn't. My throat closed.

"I'm going to relieve some of the pressure in her lungs." The man said, his voice echoing, strangely clear. Yet I didn't understand a word of it. Was he talking about me? What pressure?

I didn't feel anything, at least not until I saw a flash of metal, the sound of what could be called a balloon being punctured. Then I felt it, a hot poker in my side, burning and sharp and bleeding. I screamed. Or tried to.

Instead, the world went dark.

It came back. Still the ambulance, still Mom. I wanted to ask her where Peter was. He should be
here. I was scared. This was too much. I didn't want this. I wanted to go home.

"We're going to be okay, Mia," Mom said, pressing my hand to her lips. I felt her words more than heard them. Her fingers intertwined with mine, but I couldn't flex my fingers. They refused to move. "You're going to be okay."

I wanted to agree, but that seemed naïve. It was very clear something was wrong. This appraisal was almost clinical in aspect, just the truth. It wasn't even scary. I just knew it, felt good that I was right. I wanted to tell Mom that whatever happens, I love you. I love you I love you I love you

I could only choke, and Mom started to cry.

Then there was a phone by my ear. Peter's voice.

"Mia, are you listening?" he asked, voice crackling. I couldn't answer, only marveled that I could hear him, that he had thought to call. How nice of him. "Mia, I just wanted to say sorry, okay? I'm so sorry. I never wanted to hurt you, I didn't know, I didn't know I didn't know —"

His voice became a jumble in my ears. I wanted to say it was okay, that I wasn't angry at him anymore. Why should I? It was all just so stupid. I had overreacted.

But I didn't have the time. I had to choose my words carefully.

I had to tell him.

I love you.

At least, that's what I wanted to say. I might've said something else. I wasn't entirely sure what my mouth was doing. The sharp, stabbing pain in my chest was distracting, I couldn't find the right words. The man was pulling out a tube, sticking it in somewhere I couldn't see, raised it over his head. It filled with blood, rising up and away. I wondered where it would go. I needed that blood.

Peter was still talking, rambling. Words that had meaning. "Do you remember ohana? We used to say it all the time. It's our movie. I'm not going to forget you, okay? You're going to be okay. I'm here for you. Always here. You just gotta hang on."

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine…"

Mom was singing. I didn't notice it at first, but the tune was familiar. I heard it before bed at night. A lullaby, the one she sang when I was little. The one that reminded me to keep going. That I would always wake up, that she would always be there.

I wasn't going to wake up from this. A nightmare.

I listened to the lullaby, tried to ground myself in it. Did she want me to sleep? Would it be easier, if I just slipped away, let this all happen when I was dreaming? It sounded so nice.

"Mia," Peter again. The phone was still by my ear. There were tears in his voice. "You gotta stay with me, okay? You're my wingwoman, you're Goose, you can't go yet. I—it's not allowed!"

"Don't do this, baby," Mom said at the same time. Begging. "Don't do this to me."

"I got your six," Peter said. "Th-that's what they say, right? Just don't worry about anything. You're not alone. It'll be okay. Y-you'll be o-okay, Mia."

I know, I wanted to say. I believe you. You're always there, I know you are. Don't leave me. Don't
leave me.

I was here. And I was not.

The ambulance was going so fast. I couldn't see it, but I felt it. I was flying.

Every movement an experience. I felt it all. The potholes, the honking, the yelling driver. Sirens still going, reminding me that I was going to die really annoyed. The tires, skidding on slick roads. Tilting.

Peter was here. I couldn't see him. I knew he was in the phone, far away, unable to see me, either. "I'll be there w-when you wake up, I promise —"

The ambulance jolted. Brakes screeching, wheels swerving. The phone left my ear, and I didn't know what Peter was going to say next. I tried to call out, but then metal crashed. Engine whining. Mom screaming.

Sirens out.

"Call the chopper," said the man, still up. Dragging me, the gurney, out into the street. Dark night sky. Flashing lights. Stoplights. Cars. White box on its side.

Where's Mom? I tried to shout, but my chest was stone. I couldn't move. The man, the paramedic, spoke into his radio.

"...Do not abort! Do not abort!" he said. "Mission still... I have the package, ready for transport, over!"

Something crackled on the other side. I blinked, and suddenly a light was shining down on me. A face appeared above mine, in shadow, unrecognizable.

"It's okay, Mia," Mom said. I couldn't tell if she was hurt or not. "They're going to airlift us to the hospital, okay? Can you still hear me?"

I nodded, just barely. I wondered if she heard what the paramedic said. I am not a package. I am not a mission.

Something pressed against my face. A mask, I realized. Cold, dry oxygen filtered into my throat. The world went dark for a moment, then it was back.

A rope. Shouting. More voices. Helicopter blades, churning the air, sucking what little breath I had out of my mouth. Mom clinging to me, whispering a prayer.

"I'm giving her an injection," the medic said. "It'll take away the pain."

"No, wait —" Mom said, trying to stop him. But two arms grabbed her, pulled her away. "Just let me be with her, don't let her be alone, let me say good —"

Something pinched my neck. Then it was gone. My toes and fingers tingled, disappearing, up my arms and legs until I was floating. There was pressure around my chest, wild swinging as I left the ground. I was flying again.


I didn't see a red cross.
Then, fire.

An explosion, below. The ambulance, in flames. I just barely managed to turn my head, get a glance, before I was pulled inside. I didn't see Mom. I didn't see her anywhere.

Faint light, horrible noise. People all around me, touching me, prodding me, tools flashing, moving specters. Voice jumbled, yelling, orders, radio.

"— too much blood, ruptured lung —"

"— won't make it to the first checkpoint —"

"— stabilize her, put her on a pump, whatever it takes —"

My gaze shifted, and I couldn't tell if it was me or them. My mind grew heavy, heavier, with fog. Pulling me down. Soft hands, a blanket, there but not there. Tempting me away from here.

It was time to sleep.

The noise stopped. The voices faded. The straps were gone.

I closed my eyes.

Then there was nothing.
I woke with a start.

A gray, cloudless sky. That was the first thing I saw. Next were the trees, slowly coming into focus, their bare branches reaching up towards the sky like skeletal, clingy fingers. I was lying on something soft, but cold. Small flecks of white spiraled towards me. I couldn't feel my fingers or toes and for a second, I thought I was in one of those nightmares where I was paralyzed and trapped.

But I found I could turn my head with relative ease. My muscles protested to the movement, like I had been asleep for too long. The ground came into view, soft fuzzy white. Snow.
Wait. Snow?

As in, winter?

I surged upright, suddenly out of breath. What the hell was going on? Why was it snowing? It's September, in New York, it shouldn't be snowing yet.

But the more I looked around, I realized I wasn't in New York anymore. At least, not the city. The trees and snow extended, limitless, into the distance, with no signs of skyscrapers in sight. In the distance I saw a huge mountain range. It was completely unfamiliar; then again, I had never been outside of the city aside from a few field trips, so I really didn't know what kind of mountains I was looking at right now. The Appalachians were pretty big, right?

Even if this was it, that didn't give me a lot of answers. Why was it winter all of a sudden? Was it another one of those freak snowstorms in the summer, like the one that happened a few years ago? Weather was kind of unpredictable, but I found myself doubting that over a foot of snow could last in the hearty spring of the Eastern Seaboard.

It didn't make any sense. Then I realized I was asking all the wrong questions. Who cared why it was snowing? The more important question was: Where was I? How did I even get out here?

What the hell happened?

A scan of my recent memories only gave me what I already knew – Manhattan, end of September. I was reading *Frankenstein*. Peter was there, maybe? It definitely wasn't this cold. Nothing that told me why I was here, why I was so far away from the city, from civilization.

Panic started to rise. Then I finally looked down at myself, and realized that things were even worse.

I was wearing clothes I had never seen before. White pants, white tank top, things I didn't own. They were way too clean, starchy and made of cotton. They reminded me of the clothes hospital patients wear, or maybe inmates at an asylum.

It was also completely inappropriate for this kind of weather. I tried wiggling my toes, with some success. They were stiff with cold and when I did move them, it started to hurt.

I wrapped my arms around myself. My fingers brushed against something on my left shoulder. I frowned, saw the bandaged wrapped around my arm. Oh, great, I hurt myself, too? I picked at the tape, trying to see what was underneath – but as soon as I saw a flash of red, I chickened out and slapped the bandage back in place. I winced, gasping at the sudden pain. A fresh wound, on top of it all.

At the turn of my head, I saw my hair out of the corner of my eye, flicking over my shoulder. I reached up, feeling my hair. It was soft and smooth – smoother than it had ever been in my entire life. Wherever I had been, it must have some quality conditioner. Why would I have left that behind?

Its quality wasn't what bothered me, though. The length was. Before, my hair, although thin, had been long – mid-back, at least.

Now? It was just under my chin. Anger coursed through me at once. Why the hell would I cut my hair? It was one of the few things I liked about myself! Short hair never looked good on me.

And maybe it was just me, but my body didn't feel right as well. Just… all of it. My lungs felt big and empty, feeling every stab of cold with each breath. My arms and legs felt too long, too heavy. My shoulders and hips, too wide. Maybe it was just from the numbness of being in the snow for too
long.

Oh, my god, what happened? All this change, and no memory, no answers, no nothing. I was lost, I was cold, I was hurt, and (now that I think about it) starving. My breathing was coming out in sharp gasps. I couldn't remember any of this happening to me. Was it even me who put these clothes on? What did I do to my shoulder? Why did everything hurt? It felt like I ran a hundred miles without taking any stops.

My throat felt parched. At least that had an easy solution. I reached for some snow, brought it to my mouth. I didn't care that it would lower my core body temperature – I needed hydration, now.

The cold was soothing, and brought a new shock to my system. This time, though, it was beneficial. My thoughts cleared for a moment, and I allowed myself to indulge in the snow melting on my tongue.

I had to stay calm. The best part about this situation was that I was still alive. I could work with that. It wouldn't be too hard to formulate a plan, find a way to get out of the woods (literally) and get help. Go home.

Holy crap, Mom. Did she even know where I was right now? She must be freaking the eff out right now. I'm going to be so grounded.

No, no, don't think about that. Just concentrate on the problem at hand. Prioritize.

I took a deep breath, trying to calm myself down again. Thinking about Mom, or my life before this would just be a distraction. I needed to focus on surviving.

Steeling myself, I got up. My legs were weaker than I thought – my knees almost buckled beneath me, and I had to grab a tree to support myself. My feet felt too big, unwieldy, likely due to the fact I couldn't feel them and control them as I used to. Using the tree to keep myself upright, I straightened my back; I felt like a hunchback. My muscles were so stiff that it just seemed easier to stay hunched over, but that made it harder to walk. I forced myself to stretch my spine, earning only more pain for it; apparently, I must have been lifting weights, too, because my shoulder and arm muscles were sore as all get out.

Good god, what did I do? I looked around. The world seemed a little clearer now that I was standing up. I could see a greater distance, if only slightly. There were no footprints I could see that might've hinted where I came from, or if anyone else had been around. I guess I really was on my own. I heaved a sigh, pushing away from the tree, stumbling a little on my own legs before regaining my balance. I swayed dangerously, but managed to stay upright. The snow drift didn't make it any easier to move.

I put one foot in front of the other. My leg sank into the snow. I was almost thankful for the numbness – the pain the extreme cold would bring wasn't registering. I wondered if I already had frostbite. My toes seemed fine, not discolored or anything, but I imagined if I stayed out here for much longer, it wouldn't stay that way.

I had to find a house. A road, a car, anything that might have people, a phone I could use. I needed to get help. I needed to get home.

That was a good enough plan for me.

I scanned the forest again. Which direction should I go? I didn't want to accidentally wander deeper into unknown wilderness. There had to be a sign of civilization somewhere.
It took an agonizingly long time for me to see anything remotely like what I was looking for. All I could see were trees, hundreds of trees, and mountains, and a sky so thick with clouds that I couldn't tell what time of day it was. I was about to give up, and just pick a random direction, when I spotted something sticking out from the trees on a low mountain to my right. Lines too straight, shape too wonky shaped to be a tree.

A radio tower.

Yes! In a place like this, any town would have to be close to that tower – otherwise, coverage would be crappy at best, and utterly nonexistent at worse.

I grinned, despite my dismal situation. Hope filled my chest and I started trudging in my direction. I would find a town, I could call the police. Everything was going to be all right.

Not once did I think to look behind me at my own silhouette lying in the ground. If I had, I would've seen the deep red staining the snow.

When I found a road, I got excited. It was paved, although very old, but it was the second sign of civilization I had seen so far. I took a break on a nearby rock, considering my options. This meant I was getting closer, right? That there was a house nearby, maybe a town. I might actually get home. I chose a direction and started walking again.

But my feelings of hope and optimism didn't last long; maybe twenty minutes in and still no houses. Thirty minutes. An hour. The sky got darker and not even a measly little car passed by.

As night came closer, it got even colder. I couldn't stop shaking, and exhaustion started to take hold again. The world shifted and swayed with each step — dizzying, but became indiscernible when everything went black. The night was peaceful, but my mind fell into a stupor, unable to tell fantasy from reality.

Every so often I'd see a spark of light and stumble forward, suddenly hopeful, ready to cry with relief. It could've been anything; like from a window, a car, even a distant lantern. But each time, the light would just grow farther and farther, before blinking out completely.

And I'd stop. And I'd cry.

And I kept walking.

I only know I was on the road by the roughness beneath my feet. It was only slightly better than the lumpy cold of the snow, but not by much.

Eventually I stopped looking. I just closed my eyes, hung my head, and made sure my feet were still moving, even if was only inches, maybe if was just a slow, zombie-like shuffle to some distant, far-off dream.

I wanted Mom. I wanted her hug, her smile, her it's-going-to-be-all-right. I wanted her to tell me what to do, that I wasn't in trouble, that everything was going to be fine so long as paid attention and did the right thing.

But what was the right thing? I was doing all I could: keep walking, keep moving, find help. But it didn't give me what I want. Answers. Where was I? How did I get here? Where were my clothes, New York, my life? Where was my Mom?

Sounds started to blend into each other. I couldn't tell my feet from my fingers. I didn't even bother to hug myself anymore; I was so cold it didn't even matter.
Suddenly, my foot fell in an unseen hole - I gasped, unbalanced, as my ankle twisted under my weight. I crashed to the tarmac, sliding on my hands. I heard cloth tearing as I skinned my knees. At the same time, there was an awful crack as my ankle gave out and I whimpered — I would've cried out had I the energy left to do so.

My breathing came in hard. I was on the verge of sobbing again — the pain was a harsh reminder of where I was, how lost I was, the utter hopelessness of it all.

I tried to get back up, but my ankle collapsed as soon as I tried to straighten it. Another stab of pain sent me down, face against the tarmac. There was dirt in my mouth, but I didn't try to get it out — my arms felt too heavy, joints stiff, fingers unresponsive.

And I felt so sleepy. The ground was soft, like a giant pillow, so warm and welcoming. It was almost like I was floating, and I didn't fight it. I didn't want to. I just wanted to close my eyes, rest for a bit. Maybe when I woke up again, I'll be back in my bed, and find this all to be a terrible nightmare...

Even as I sat my head down on the ground, skin tingling at the invisible blanket being dropped over me, light flickered in the distance. Silhouettes, thin columns of trees, scattered and thick like a line of soldiers, tangled with crooked, bone branches, washing over me like shadows of memories.

I opened my eyes again, disturbed to have my sleep taken away from me so quickly. What was that? Who turned on the lights? It was past midnight; I needed sleep. I had school tomorrow.

The lights grew brighter and brighter, accompanied by a growing roar and my head dropped, the world falling out from underneath me and I slipped into oblivion.

✮✮✮

The body appeared like a ghost beneath their headlights.

"Sergei, look out!" the woman cried, grabbing her husband's arm and pointing with her other hand.

He saw it a split second after she did and hit the brakes - tires screeching, wheel spinning around, and the entire car careening around the body. It swung back on two wheels, the passengers screaming as the car tilted at a 45-degree angle, before the car made a 180 spin and crashed back down on four wheels, coming to a complete stop.

The engine whirred, but all was silent within the vehicle. Man and wife were breathing hard, exchanging looks of shock with each other. Then they looked back at the body, unmovable on the road. It appeared stark white under the only lights within a twenty-mile radius — white and red and very, very dead.

The woman whispered, almost as though she were afraid of being overheard. "Are they...are they dead?"

The man, Sergei, blinked slowly, his shaking hand wandering to the door handle. His shirt was wet from spilled coffee. "I-I'll go check. Stay here, Katya. Call your mother. I think...I think we're going to be late."

As the woman scavenged around the car for her purse (everything had been tossed around), the man stumbled out of the vehicle, his knees wobbling from the shock of the near-accident, the fear of what
he might discover on this lonely stretch of road in the middle of nowhere.

The cold hit him like a brick wall and he shivered, pulling his jacket closer around his body. Maybe he should've gotten his gloves first — only they were lost somewhere in the car.

He took hesitant steps towards the body, his body casting a large shadow as he walked out in front of the car. Bending down, Sergei held out his hands in caution. Now that he was closer, he could see the body was a girl. Young, thin, and dressed in what looked like cotton pajamas. Her back was covered in red streaks.

It took him several long seconds to trace the blood to the two holes in her back.

Sergei gasped, stumbling back on his hands in a crab-walk when he realized what they were. His heart hammered in his chest as a million possibilities ran through his mind: was this a murder? Some sort of mob hit? A kidnapping? Or maybe something to do with those brownshirts. Something that an average man like him, with a family and a job, couldn't afford to get involved with.

"Oh, my god," he murmured, drawing a hand over his face. What should he do? He wanted to leave the body, to just go home like he never saw anything, but there was no way he could convince his wife to do the same. "Why me?"

If he didn't do something now, then it would only be someone else who inevitably drove down this road. Maybe it would lead into a real accident, with injuries and death. Sergei didn't want to touch the body, but he also didn't want anyone else to get hurt.

Still unsure if he was going to take the body or leave it, he approached her once more. He'd have to contact the police. There would be an investigation. He might be a suspect. So would his wife.

They would be very late getting home.

He sighed. Well, it was too late now. Might as well get it over with.

Then Sergei rested his hands on the girl's shoulder. Her skin was very cold, just like a dead body should be.

Then she groaned in response, very much like a dead body wouldn't.

Sergei yelped, jumping back again. He wrung his hands, like he had just burned himself. And right before his eyes, the girl rolled on her back, arms flopping against the cold ground, her lips and fingers a worrying shade of blue.

"Katya!" he called, unable to hide his panic. He scrambled to his feet, cupping his hands over his mouth so the woman could hear him over her conversation on the phone. He saw her shift behind the dark window, her eyes wide under the dim light inside the car. "Katya! Get the blanket! She's still breathing!"

As Sergei turned back around to look at the girl, he could hear a string of curses as Katya unbuckled her seatbelt and crawled into the backseat to get their emergency gear. It was meant for the occasion that they might end up stranded in with no gas, if or when it ever happened.

He leaned over the girl, tried shaking her awake. "Hello? Little girl, are you okay? Can you hear me?"

Sergei could barely wrap his head around this. There was no doubt that the holes in her back were from bullets, yet this girl looked completely fine, if rather frozen, besides that. And she was
breathing, somehow, she was still alive.

Her lips moved, but her voice was so soft that he couldn't hear her. Sergei brought his ear closer, but she was just saying gibberish.

Footsteps beside him, and Katya appeared, wool blanket in her arms. She sounded breathless, like she just had a fight with her mother. "Is she — is she still alive?"

"She's breathing," He said, which was true, although he didn't know for how long. "She needs a hospital."

Katya nodded slowly. Although her face was in shadow, she had gone pale. "The nearest hospital is thirty minutes away. Unless you want to call for help —"

"— She'll freeze before then —"

"— Mom will be so angry —"

"— Your mother is always angry —"

"— Sergei!"

"What?" he frowned as his wife tossed the blanket over the girl, her hands flicking like she was afraid to touch the body. "Let's get her in the car. It'll be warmer."

The girl was heavier than she looked, and it took both Sergei and Katya to haul her into the backseat. What made it worse was the girl's struggling — somehow, after spending what could've been hours or more in subzero temperatures, she was still breathing, still moving. Sergei wondered if this was normal.

Katya voiced his worries when they returned to their seats and he kicked the car into gear. "Do you…do you think she is one of them?"

"Them who?" Sergei pretended not to know what she was talking about.

"You know. Those people with the-the fire." Her voice stumbled over the words. "Like what they did to that town down south. The smoke in the mountains. Could she be —"

"No," Sergei said firmly as they got back on the road. It wasn't that he didn't believe his wife, but that he couldn't afford to at this moment. And maybe, yes, he hoped Katya was wrong. "She is only a child. What could she possibly have to do with the attacks?"

Behind them, the girl muttered something, a language neither of them understood but recognized nonetheless. Katya and Sergei exchanged looks. Katya said, "She shouldn't be here. They don't let her kind past the borders."

"We didn't hear anything," Sergei said, the safest answer. "We take her to the hospital, then we go to your mother's house. We tell no one. And we pray. We pray that nothing happens."

"You are a fool, Sergei."

"And yet, you still married me."
Soft, warm darkness.

This time, I woke gradually.

Drifting in and out. Unable to cling to consciousness — catching a glimpse of pale green walls before slipping back again. Sounds, noises echoed in my head, rattling inside the hollowness before fading out. Then coming back in loud bursts, making me jump. But I might as well be competing for the Olympics for all that my body responded to my thoughts. Which is, not at all.

My tongue felt thick and dry. I couldn't speak when I had the coherence of mind to try. It scared me — I thought I would choke on my own tongue, and in my panic, I fell back into oblivion.

I felt weightless, like I was floating on lily pads. It didn't hurt to breathe, and as long as I didn't think about my hands or my mouth, I could enjoy the numbing sensation.

And just as I was starting to relax, it left me.

I wanted to cry out, complain, claw it back. Reality was a cold, uncomfortable truth that I couldn't face yet. A dull ache traveled up my arms, down my legs. Something was pressed against my face, but my arms were lead weights. I couldn't lift them to reach anything.

Light pierced behind my lids, for me to open my eyes and look around.

I had never been in this room before in my life, but I could recognize a hospital when I saw one. The washed-out color, the shape of the gurney, the IV tower and the tiny TV set up in the corner. Directly opposite me was a door. To my right, white curtains separated patients from one another. Pale sunlight came in from the veiled window to my left.

Beyond the door was a rush of people — doctors in white coats, nurses in patterned scrubs and clipboards, EMT's rushing past with stretchers on wheels.

It was loud and chaotic. Someone had left the door open, because it wasn't like I was sleeping or anything. The cacophony of shouting and footsteps and machine noises made it hard to focus on anything. The sounds entered my head and knocked everything loose, and I felt like I was barely treading water, being pushed and pulled by a current I couldn't see.

My gaze slid to the TV, finding a news reporter and the captions beneath her. The letters were strange, like someone forgot what the alphabet looked like, but I could barely fathom my own confusion. They were too fast for me to read anyways, so it failed to leave an impact on me.

The reporter, blonde in a blue suit and microphone, stood in front of some smoking ruins of a building. As firefighters worked behind her, she said, "...has been completely destroyed by the blast. Police have yet to determine the cause of this deadly explosion. Although response was quick, there are five reported casualties. No word yet on any suspects, but police believe that this may be a result of foul play...."

I watched, uncomprehendingly, as the report went on, showing different images of the building, before and after the explosion. It looked like it had been some sort of post office, now rendered a charred shell. In the center of the main room was a distinct circle of untouched floor, with black streaks radiating out from it. Against the walls were black silhouettes of people, arms raised like they
had been pushed before their shadows were memorialized in smoke and ash.

There were also several civilian videos of the explosion as it happened — all from on the street, the various cameras shook and crackled as a bright orange cloud erupted from the doors and windows; glass shattered and cars shifted in their parking spots. People screamed so loud it overpowered the speakers and the shots became unrecognizable as everyone started running.

It was chilling to watch, but my body barely reacted to my thoughts. I could only watch in horror as the videos repeated themselves. The reporter wasn’t speaking English, I realized, and it was too bizarre to understand how or why — but somehow, I understood what she said.

"Oh, good, you're awake."

I jolted, surprised. Turning my head, a concentrated effort, I looked up at the short-haired nurse who seemingly appeared out of nowhere. She had hooded eyes and nicotine-stained fingers, a general air of indifference that made me feel unwelcome here.

She gazed at me, entirely expressionless. "Do you remember your name? Where you are?"

Still not in English, yet perfectly understandable. I worked my jaw, trying to find the right words. "I-I don't...what day is it? What happened to me?"

"Just answer my questions, miss," The nurse replied slowly, counteracting my sluggish but panicked voice. She held up three fingers. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

"T-three," I blinked hard several times, trying to grasp what was going on. Was this all real? Was I really in a hospital? Had I gotten hurt, or was it another asthma attack? I could feel the tubes in my nose, feeding me oxygen, and at first, I thought that was it. "M-my mom, where is she?"

"Do you remember your name?" The nurse asked again, raising one eyebrow. "Once we identify you, we can contact your family. I'm sure they are very worried."

"A-Amelia..." I tried to say my last name, but I couldn't remember it. I knew I knew it, but for some reason it just wasn't coming to me. "It's...Amelia...Amelia? Amelia something?"

The nurse looked disappointed, the first recognizable expression on her face. "Perhaps it will come to you later. You have been unconscious for several days now. It is October 25th, 2012."

I stared at her, shocked. "Two-thousand — two thousand and twelve?" I repeated, already shaking my head. "No, no, that — that can't be right. It's 2010. It's September. It-it can't be 2012, it doesn't make any sense —"

"Miss, you need to relax." The nurse approached the bed, holding up a hand in reassurance. She placed it on my chest, as I had managed to actually shifting in my bed, jerking on the tubes attached to me. "There are other questions you have to answer. The police want to talk to you as well. What's the last thing you remember?"

"Um, um," I closed my eyes, my head falling back against the pillow. I squeezed my eyes as I concentrated on the scattered memories, all out of place. "A forest. Snow. Mountains. I was lost. I didn't — how did I —?"

"Two civilians brought you here," The nurse answered the question I couldn't complete, her voice still calm and placating. "They found you passed out in the middle of the road, eleven at night. You were very lucky — if they hadn't found you, you would've died from the cold."
"Cold," I repeated under my breath, the word as real and present to me as a living person. I shivered, even though I was actually quite warm, and I shook my head, wanting to be rid of the memory.

I had been lost. Lost. How? How could it be 2012? There had to be some big mistake. I couldn't miss... two...? Two years! Two years, just gone. But how? What happened?

The questions piled up, but I couldn't sort through them fast enough. I chased them in circles and in my growing confusion, I started to panic, overwhelmed by the uncertainty, the fear. My heart started beating fast, my breath picking up speed. To the nurse, I demanded, "Where am I now? Who are you? Where's my Mom?"

"Amelia, you need to take deep breaths —"

"Don't call me Amelia!" I snapped, hating the way she said my name. The rage and bitterness were sudden and powerful, and I jerked in the gurney, trying to get away from her touch.

"Who are you?" I spat. "Tell me where I am!"

I started to get up, but the woman pushed me down again. Scared and angered by the manhandling, I brought up my arm — suddenly mobile, suddenly there — and slammed my hand into her shoulder. The woman cried out, falling back hard, grabbing a side table but only knocking it over as she landed on the floor.

I gasped, horrified with myself, staring at my hand. Did I do that? Did I just shove a full-grown woman, twice my size, to the ground?

I tried to bring up my other hand, only to meet resistance. Heart pounding, I jerked forward and looked down. Two metal cuffs, one linking me to the gurney. "What the hell?"

I yanked against the handcuffs — once, twice, three times — before the metal chain snapped like dry pasta and I was free.

I didn't take the time to consider what I just did. Instead, I launched myself off the bed, stumbling over my stiff legs and jelly knees. The tubes in my arm and face pinched and pulled, but I yanked them off impatiently. Then my legs gave out beneath me and I gasped, catching myself against the gurney. The world spun and I felt nauseous for moment.

The nurse was already getting back up, calling for help. Two orderlies rushed in, but I was startled by how small they were. Standing up a little straighter, I cried out as one grabbed my arm and tried to pin it behind my back.

But he was weak, so weak. I wrenched myself easily out of his grip and — entirely on instinct — grabbed the front of his shirt and threw him against the nearest wall. He grunted in pain and crashed to the floor.

The second orderly, alarmed by my strength (that made two of us), let out a roar before attempting to tackle me to the floor.

He didn't even reach me before I backhanded him across the face, knocking him away. It didn't even hurt. The orderly fell across the gurney, dazed, while I totally freaked out.

Legs still shaky, I stumbled over the orderlies as I made my way forward. The nurse threw herself out of my way, utterly terrified and screaming for back-up, but before any reinforcements could arrive, I threw myself out the door.
Perhaps a little too hard. My momentum carried me into the opposite wall on the other side of the
door. I braced the impact with my shoulder, and the plaster dented beneath me.

Stunned, I pushed off the wall and careened through the halls, never taking more than a split-second
to acknowledge something before taking off again. The corridors were narrow and crowded, and no
matter what I did I couldn't help but collide with nearly everyone in my way.

It made no sense — the spaces where I should've slipped through before were no longer wide
enough. Everyone here was so much shorter than I expected, when I was so used to being towered
over. I felt like Gilligan on the island of Lilliputia, where the world just didn't fit me anymore.

People exclaimed and cursed as I barreled down one hall after the next. I had no idea where I was or
where I was going - so I took random turns, hoping to find a door or even a window that led outside.

Just when I felt lost in a maze of endless white halls, I spotted a green sign over a door and made a
beeline for it.

There turns and one trip over an empty gurney later, I burst through double-wide doors and found
myself on a street in the middle of a city.

A city.

Not New York City.

The cobblestones were freezing under my bare feet, sharp stinging pain that stuck to my skin — but I
was so shocked that I didn't even notice. I didn't see the snow or the overcast sky or the people
staring at me, the wild and manic girl that just came tearing out of a hospital, wearing nothing but the
same white clothes they found me in.

No. The only thing I saw were the buildings, made of stone and wood. The cars, faded paint,
outdated by over twenty-years. The cobblestone street, the signs in Cyrillic. The men on the rooftops,
carrying guns.

I dropped to my knees in dismay, arms hanging limply, all breath leaving my lungs. I fell into a snow
drift, helpless, gaping as the entire world crashed down on my shoulders.

I stayed there until my view was blocked by a sea of legs. Doctors and orderlies having finally
caught up with me.

I didn't react to their presence until one tried to haul me up. Even though I knew there were only
trying to help me, my body rebelled, rejecting their touch. At first, I flinched away - but when they
grabbed my upper arms, I started to fight back.

The sounds coming out of my mouth weren't human. I didn't realize I was crying until I tasted salt on
my tongue. This was wrong. This was all wrong.

I managed to land a punch on one man's face. I didn't know how important he was, but next thing I
knew, I felt a sharp prick in my arm and before I could knock away the needle, I was already falling.

The orderlies caught me before my face could hit the ground. The world faded as they dragged me
back, my feet leaving paths in the snow and slush behind me. The last thing I saw was the alien sky
before passing out completely.
Chapter Nine

The halls were screaming.

I couldn't see much, pinned down. For three days, they kept me on that gurney, using leather straps I couldn't break out of to keep me from trying to escape again.

They didn't have to worry. After seeing the strange city, I didn't want to go outside again. I didn't want to leave the familiarity of the hospital.

I could still hear plenty, though. The rush of footsteps, the shouting, the rolling trolleys, the crying and weeping and groaning. Machines beeping, doors slamming, sirens going off non-stop. A strange, breathy rattle, like wheezing.

People dying. I didn't know that's what it was until later, and the sound would haunt my dreams for months to come.

"Hello?" I called out, hoping to get someone's attention. Maybe someone could explain to me what was going on. Maybe they'd actually let me up. Despite the wounds on my back, I was allowed to sleep with my head facing the ceiling, so I guess it wasn't that bad. "Hey, what's going on? Someone let me out!"

I had been in and out, thanks to the painkillers the doctor put me on — a short, belligerent man with small spectacles and white hair — which had now mysteriously vanished, so of course I was wide awake and ready to go now. But during my hours of consciousness, I was at the mercy of his incessant questions, none of which I could answer.

"Why were you in the mountains?"

"I don't know."

"How did you get shot?"

"I don't know."

"Are you being difficult? Why won't you just tell us the truth?"

And so on. I was still catching up on the whole getting-shot thing, which I found extremely
disturbing, for obvious reasons.

I almost didn't believe the doctor at first, but then he showed me the bullets, flattened and rust-colored, kept in a small plastic container, and rattled them in my face. "And what are these, then? Whose back did I dig these out of? You're lucky, girl! They didn't even go through your ribcage, you shouldn't even be breathing right now. Two bullets! Do you know who tried to kill you?"

At that point, I had gotten annoyed with his attitude, and had rather flippantly replied, "Well, that's hard to say, since they shot me from behind."

That was right after they pulled me back into the hospital. The doctor, whose name I still couldn't recall, hadn't come back to see me since. Maybe he got a clue and just gave up.

The pale green walls pressed in around me, sickening and tight. The noise, all this awful noise, just rising to the ceiling, filling every crevice and corner. I couldn't escape from it. I couldn't even cover my ears. What was this? What was happening?

This was all some horrible dream. First, I was in some foreign country, now I've been shot in the back — twice — and lived on top of it all?

Things like that didn't happen to girls like me. It just didn't make any sense. Why would I be shot at to begin with? Why was I here? How did I get here?

Even now, as I watched the panic growing in the hospital, I tried to scan my memories, find an answer to all of this. The last thing I could remember were flashing red-and-blue lights, a siren, Mom's face — wait, I had been dying, hadn't I? It didn't seem real then, much like my current situation felt right now.

More images flashed in my mind. The car crash, the ambulance on its side, the helicopter coming to rescue us. Mom clinging to me, begging me to hang on, or let go, or-or-or—

A shudder coursed down my body, a chill making the hairs on my arms stand on end. The thought of dying wasn't exactly alien to me, but then it actually happening?

Another terrible dream that I could barely comprehend.

I just wanted Mom.

I just wanted to go home.

"Up!" A voice broke me out of my reverie. I jumped as the nurse — the one with the short black hair, the one I pushed — suddenly barged in, grabbing the strap on my right wrist and ripping it off in one go. "Up, girl! Time to leave!"

"W-what?" I just stared at the nurse as she continued down to my ankles, roughly shoving my legs off the gurney. Unsure of what else to do, and now able to move, I sat up, unable to believe what I saw.

"You must leave!"

"Why?" I said, watching with a dumb expression as she removed the IV from my arm, slapped on a hasty band-aid. These guys had gone through so much effort to keep me here, they still didn't have answers (neither did I, but that's not the point). "You still don't know what happened to me!"

"Of course we do!" The nurse snapped as she undid the last strap around my left wrist, then rammed
both hands into my back, between my shoulder blades, and pushed me off the bed. "You are alive, are you not? You can stand! You're healthy! What do you need a gurney for?"

"Wait, what's happening?" I stumbled to my feet, wincing as pain shot down my back. Of course, she had to touched the still-fresh stitches. Just because the bullets didn't kill me didn't mean they still didn't hurt sometimes. Still, I managed to gesture to the door, as another nurse wheeled in a patient — covered in blood, a bandage over his eye — and deposited him on a gurney to my right. "What's going on?"

"Another attack!" The nurse snapped as she grabbed the sheets on my gurney, ripped them off, then grabbed some off a cart to replace them. "What are you, stupid? Haven't you been watching the TV?"

To be honest, no. It was just a reminder of how I didn't want to be here, of how I was in some strange place that spoke a strange language.

"There was an explosion!" the nurse explained when I said nothing. "Just an hour ago. You could hear it, even from a mile away. The second one in a week. Damn revolutionaries! Can't leave well enough alone!"

An explosion? Like a bomb? I was asleep an hour ago, and I had been jolted awake by something, too sudden for a groggy mind to comprehend.

Now the details were clear. A distant boom, rattling of the glass window — innocuous at first, but so obvious now that I knew what it was. The following noise after that, a soft roar that crescendo into screams and stampedes. I hadn't known what it was at the time; I wasn't exactly familiar with what the noise of hundreds of terrified people sounded like. This whole place was filled with strange sounds.

Then, in less than an hour, the already busy hospital was suddenly rendered into complete chaos.

"And now you must go!" The nurse finished, fixing the bed with surprising speed. What normally took me fifteen minutes she did in under thirty seconds. She went around, grabbed me by the arm, and hauled me out of the room. "We have no room for freeloaders like you!"

I didn't try to resist her this time the nurse manhandled me. Her shouting made me timid — a fact that didn't help with what was happening in the halls. I stumbled over splayed legs and crouched bodies as she led me out. Men, women, and children, some in worse states than other, but all of them injured. Children cried while parents comforted. Anyone who wasn't sitting was moving, looking for help, trying to get answers, anything to make sense of this mess.

The nurse had to push and shove to clear a path, but I still kept running into people. The halls felt unusually narrow, my legs slow to respond. Between apologies and pardons, I managed to ask the nurse, a little breathless. "B-but I still don't know how I got here. How I got hurt, how to get home —"

"Not our problem!" The nurse snapped. "It's called priorities, we can't help if you're too simple to remember your own name! Maybe you'll find the answers you're looking for outside!"

"But —" I tried to protest, but got decked by an errant elbow to the chin and was too preoccupied with the new pain in my jaw to continue talking. The nurse didn't halt for a second as she escorted me out, like it was her personal mission. I suppose she was still a little sour about what I did a couple days previous. "Is this about me pushing you? I already said sorry —"
"Please, I've handled men bigger than you, who fought harder," the nurse sniffed, not the least bit fazed. "The doctor decided he had more pressing issues than some stupid little girl who wouldn't talk. So, we're letting you go."

Before I knew it, we were outside. The cold air hit me, instantly chilling me to the bone. My bare feet touched the cobblestone and immediately I wanted none of this. It was loud out here, too, with cars and ambulances and more people wanting to get inside. More screaming and crying. Smoke in the distance.

The nurse let go, turned to go back inside, but stopped when I called, "Wait, w-what am I supposed to do? I don't know what's going on."

She paused, frowned, for the first time looking hesitant as she appraised me, standing there at the base of the steps, hugging my arms and shivering. "...I'm sorry, but we can't help you anymore. I know little more than you do, it seems. The questions you have won't be answered here."

"Where am I supposed to go? You can't just leave me out here like this!"

The nurse was silent for a moment, looking me up and down. She sighed, then said, "Wait right here," before disappearing back into the hospital.

I thought she was going to play a fast one on me, just leaving me behind like this, and for three seconds I felt like I was going to cry — before she returned a few minutes later, something folded under her arm.

She handed it to me. A green canvas jacket, worn but still thick. On top of that, a pair of old tennis shoes. "Here, take these. I hope it helps." Then, she pressed something into my hand. Paper and coins. "It's not much, but should be enough to get you some food. I suggest getting out of town while you still can."

I stared at her, speechless, then at her command hurried to shrug on the jacket. Stuffing the money into my pocket, I managed to stutter, "T-thank you."

"Stay safe out there," the nurse said, her eyes leveling me with a serious gaze. "This world is changing, and I'm afraid we have yet to see the worst of it. It's no place for someone like you."

I was about to say something else, but then a siren pierced the air, and another ambulance came screaming down the road, skidding to a stop in front of the hospital doors. People scattered as the doors flew open and what looked like a dozen people piled out, bleeding and hurt, like some sort of morbid clown car. The nurse disappeared in the rush, and I was pushed away, tripping across the cobblestones and onto the street.

I nearly fell, but caught myself in time. Shoes still in my arms, I turned to give one last glance at the hospital — a low brick building with barred windows — before slipping the shoes on my feet.

Then I straightened, wrapped my arms around myself to keep the jacket closed. I looked up at the sky, hoping to see the sun but only got a gray overcast sky. It diluted the shadows, made everything hazy and dull-colored. Up on the rooftops, I saw those men with guns again. This time, they held the firearms aloft, full alert. What were they, guards, military? One was even looking at me, and I froze.

It seemed so stupid — what did I have to worry about? There was no reason for them to be suspicious of me. I had done nothing wrong.

But my stomach did flips. I didn't really know that, did I?
I didn't move until the guard finally looked away, apparently finding nothing of interest in me.

It was a small relief.

✮✮✮

Two years.

Gone. Just like that.

One day its 2010 in New York City, the next its 2012 in God-Knows-Where.

Two years I couldn't remember. Was this what it was like for Rip Van Winkle when he fell asleep for an entire century, and woke up in the future, no idea what happened? Because I was starting to sympathize.

Did that mean I was fifteen now? Oh god. I wasn't ready to be fifteen. I felt too young to be fifteen. And if it really was October, that meant I'd turn sixteen in just four months.

It was completely mind-blowing.

Although it would explain why I had boobs now. Among other things.

I shuffled down the street, not really sure where I was going, or what I should do. The streets were alien to me, gray buildings with dark windows, staring me down, an unwelcome visitor. Further away from the hospital, the streets were quiet, almost empty. Cars drifted by slowly, cautious. Other passerby didn't look at me, and their shoulders bumped hard as we passed. Everyone was tense.

I felt off. I was scared, too, like them, but for different reasons. Where was I? What was this city? Why were all the words in Cyrillic and how could I read them? What had happened in those two years that led to this?

It was just the same questions, over and over. I hugged myself, fingers digging into my arms. The pinching woke me up a little, but it didn't make me think any clearer. I still wanted to go home. I still had no idea how to do that.

I just wanted Mom. I wanted a phone, I wanted to call for help. There had to be someone around here, right? Maybe the police…

But I saw no police, no enforcement aside from the men on the rooftops who patrolled in silence.

I had a feeling they weren't here to help little lost girls like me.

Something flashed in the store window to my right, and I glanced at it. Strange eyes met mine and my heart skipped a beat. Someone's watching me!

I flinched away from the sight, threw myself away from the window, before I realized it was just my reflection.

My heart pounded in my throat, my eyes flicking towards the stranger in the window again. Short blond hair, dirty and ragged at the ends, hollow gray eyes shadowed in black, a skeletal face; arms and legs too long, pale and sinewy, hunched over like some deformed creature of the night.
Alarmed, I stumbled away, too frightened to get a closer look at what I saw. In the back of my mind, I knew it was me that I saw, knew it wasn't some scary monster — but I comprehend how that thing was me.

Did I really look like that? No, no, it wasn't possible. I must've just been seeing things. Scared of my own reflection, my mind playing tricks on me. Yeah, that's it.

Despite that little pep talk, I still couldn't make myself look for my reflection again.

I continued onwards, down the street, slightly off-balance. I felt like I was walking through a dream, gazing up at these strange buildings, the broken windows, the scorch marks. Some were worn away, but I didn't fail to notice the holes dappled in the walls, from bullets that struck long ago.

Signs of a past battle were everywhere, now that I noticed. It was easy to spot where old buildings had been repaired with fresh wood and new stone; empty lots where a storefront or an apartment might have once stood, but struck down. In those buildings that still stood, there were chunks missing in the facades, the steps, the trimmings. There were still bits of stone, some as big as my head, pushed into the corners and crevices, left to be forgotten.

This wasn't America. I knew it before, but it only struck me then the truth. This wasn't just some battle, was it? Maybe it had something to do with those revolutionaries the nurse mentioned. The explosions. Bombings.

What country would be in a state like this? I thought back to my knowledge of current events, which was admittedly two years out of date — two years, oh my God — but I couldn't recall any particular European country that might've had this kind of trouble, either now or in the recent past.

I fingered the money in my pocket. As I walked, I pulled out a coin, examined its shape. I studied its copper surface, its hexagonal shape. On one side was a crest, the other a large '5' engraved, underneath the word 'kopeks'. I spun it around, looking at the crest again. An eagle with its outspread wings, and a crown over its head. I was used to American currency, so I was a little disappointed that there were no signifiers to country.

Well, guess I had to find another way. But I knew it was odd that what was presumably a European country (if the architecture, climate, and people were anything to go by), why weren't they using Euros?

No, kopeks were part of the Russian currency, right? I knew I wasn't in Russia, though, since the eagle on the coin had one head, instead of the two seen on the Russian crest. So, I must at least be in a country near it. Which meant I was even further east on the globe than I thought. Jesus, where even was I?

The air was filled with the sound of bustle and chatter as I drew closer to a square. Soft music played from a distant radio I couldn't see as I entered, finding myself surrounded by busy storefronts and stalls selling food and wares.

It was almost like the terror from before didn't exist here. Citizens perused and conversed, albeit quietly and behind cupped hands.

A nearby bakery filled the air with the smell of bread and cake, and my stomach growled. I hugged myself even tighter as my mouth salivated. I didn't even realize I was hungry, distracted by my thoughts, but now I couldn't think of anything else besides food. The hospital had kept me fed on fluids and Jell-O, but it was hardly filling, or as satisfying as actual bread and fruit.
I checked the money in my pocket. Ten — what were they called, rubles? — ten rubles and sixty-five kopeks. Hopefully, that was enough to get me something before I found more money, or a way out of here. Whichever came first.

I made a beeline for the bakery, guided by my stomach to the first thing I wanted. Still, I checked the window first, gauging the prices and trying to balance size to price; I didn't want to spend all my money on bread, or food for that matter.

To be honest, I had no idea what I was doing. I didn't know what professionals would advise someone to do if they woke up in a foreign country, with no memory of how they got there or the two-year interim, with little money and hardly the right clothes for the weather. I was still wearing the clothes that the couple in the car found me in, along with a new shirt, since the old one had been removed and thrown away when the doctors removed the bullets from my back.

As I pushed the door to go inside, I tried to remember, when I was walking in those woods, if it had hurt. If there had been any indication that I could recall of being hurt.

But I didn't. Aside from the cold, I had felt fine.

I picked out two muffins, and didn't reconsider how much it cost even when the baker added the tax. One muffin should've been enough, but now that I was in here, my stomach twisted in on itself like that of a starving man. I had to have two, even if it took almost half of what money I had to pay for it.

I left the bakery, already halfway finished with the first muffin, as I considered my previous thoughts. Maybe I had just been numb to the pain. Even now, the two scars on my back barely twinged under the bandaging. Maybe the snow had helped? I heard that low blood temperature due to the cold sometimes slowed bleeding from serious injuries. Could that have been it?

I wandered over to a fruit stall, vibrant apples and pears enticing the eye. It was one of the few elements of color in what felt like the entire city. There wasn't anything exotic like oranges or bananas, which would probably cost more anyways, in a little market like this.

I still couldn't quite believe the fact that I had been shot. Twice. Didn't such an occasion usually leave people a lot deader?

Just another question on an ever-growing pile, and the coil of dread in my chest tightened. Why did I get the feeling that I was better off not knowing the answer to any of these questions? The mere fact that these things happened — all together, no less — was leading me to think that something truly horrible had happened.

But what?

That's when I saw the girl.

The first thing I noticed was her long brown hair, billowing in the wind. It let me to her piercing hazel eyes, and I met them with a jolt. She was staring at me. She didn't even blink, but her expression flickered, something I couldn't interpret.

Her clothes were, in a way, like mine — which I didn't know was a good thing or a bad thing. Her dress was threadbare, really just a long red plaid shirt tied at the waist with a ragged leather belt. A wool shawl was draped across her shoulders and arms, not nearly warm enough, yet she didn't look cold. It was slightly tangled with a red-patterned scarf around her neck, and beneath that a gold chain, maybe the nicest thing she wore. I couldn't make out the pendant that hung at the end of it,
only that it seemed to be pointed.

She had better footwear than I did. Black stockings, although torn, and old work boots, laces tied around her ankles. Nothing the girl wore looked new or clean. Of course, what made it worse was the fidgeting, her twitchy fingers and hunched shoulders. Knitted fingerless gloves completed the homeless look — a fact I knew all too well from the streets in New York City.

As I took in her entire appearance, the way her hair hung over her face, something tickled in the back of my mind. A thought, a memory? I tried to grasp at it, but it was as slippery as soap in the shower. But I couldn't deny what I felt, that sense of déjà vu.

Did I... did I know her?

No. Impossible. I'd remember someone who looked as strange as she did.

Speaking of: Who was she? And why was she starting at me? I didn't remember seeing her before, but I had the distinct feeling she'd been standing there the whole time.

She was less than ten feet away. If I spoke to her, it wouldn't be awkward, right? So, I opened my mouth, but the girl quickly shook her head, the movement so slight I almost didn't catch it. But her eyes went wide, her lips pressed thin.

She was scared. Her face didn't show it, but I could tell. But why was she so nervous?

Not going to lie, I honestly thought she was planning to take something, using the good ol' fashioned Five Finger Discount. Maybe I was making unfair assumptions based on her appearance, but there were a bunch of apples right in front of us, easy to palm if you were smart about it. And teenagers generally weren't known for their cool-headedness while participating in illegal activities.

I thought about saying something anyway, breaking that unspoken contract between all kids of not snitching on each other in the name of fellow teenage shenanigans. No, the right thing to do would be to tell the stall owner the girl's suspicious behavior, maybe pray for some free food as thanks.

But the girl wasn't reaching for the apples. She shifted restlessly on her feet, as though she intended to run at any second. Her gaze flicked over my shoulder, eyes focusing on something for one long second, before her gaze flicked back to mine. What was she looking at?

I was about to look around, but the girl just shook her head again, in that same furtive movement, like she knew exactly what I was going to do. In return, I threw her a silent what-the-heck-is-up-with-you look.

Then I spotted the men behind her.

Like us, not moving, and thus they stood out from the regular hustle and bustle from the crowd. I counted three of them — and one woman, with red hair — milling about by a cafe about twenty feet behind the girl. I guess that would've been normal, but on top of their stiffness, they also weren't doing anything. They weren't eating, they weren't talking. Just looking out over the square, not looking quite at us, but eyes covering every corner.

They also weren't dressed like everyone else. While the citizens of this town had worn clothes, stained boots, and long scarves (still significantly better than what the girl owned), these people were different. Their clothes too nice, too dark, a unique selection of black and green. Thick boots and leather jackets, all similar in style. If I hadn't known any better, I would've thought they were in a rock band.
The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. The very sight of them sent off alarm bells in my head. In front of me, the girl's eyes flickered over my shoulder again. I had to resist the attempt to look. Were there more behind me?

Wait, was that what she was trying to warn me? Who were these people? Were they following me? Her? Both of us?

I glanced back at the men and woman by the cafe, but I nearly jumped when I couldn't find them there anymore. They were just gone.

No way. What the hell was going on?

Over our heads, a church bell rang, calling out the time. At each subsequent gong, the people in the square started to disperse, called back to work or home for noontime. It was almost ritualistic watching people filed away in a low roar, leaving businesses sparse and the streets startlingly quiet and empty.

Well, not completely empty.

Five people didn't move.

They appeared from the crowd, like rocks from beneath a low tide. Tall, muscular, imposing in dark clothing — all of them, male and female alike, with expressionless faces. They even wore sunglasses, which went all too perfectly with the creepy-ass *Matrix* vibe.

Like them, the girl hadn't moved. Her shoulders rose and fell quickly, rapid breathing. I hadn't yet decided how I wanted to feel about all of this, but from her reaction I knew I should feel a lot more scared than I was right now.

My chest tightened as I came to the realization that this was all very, very real. This wasn't just some crazy scene from a movie, this was my life, right now, and I didn't have anyone to make it better, to fix this. No Mom, no police, no Peter to tell me it was going to be all right.

No, I was alone.

A lone dove cooed, sad and mournful, and behind me I heard footsteps. I glanced to my left, saw something move in the store window's reflection. The shape of a men — no, two, if not more — walking slowly forward from around a parked black van.

I couldn't quite figure out how close he was, but from the sound of it they would reach me in less than a minute.

I had no idea who they were, if they were government or military or secret force, good guys or bad guys; not a clue what they had to do with this girl or with me, but I did know one thing: I didn't want any of them to touch me.

Behind the girl, the team — because what else could they be? — started shifting closer. Then stopped. I had no idea why they weren't just rushing in. We were just two little girls, why were they being so cautious.

*Just turn yourself in*, said the passive part of my brain, the one that didn't want to make this situation any worse than it already was. *You don't want them angry at you, do you? They might just be trying to help.*

The rational part of my braid responded with, *Yeah, not gonna happen.*
If these guys were trying to help us, if that's why they were being cautious because they didn't want to scare us, they were sure doing one hell of a job. Going this slowly just meant they didn't want to get caught too soon.

But I still couldn't fathom why. What were they worried of? That'd we'd run away? I had the distinct feeling they could catch up with little ol' me without breaking a sweat.

So then what?

Unfortunately, I didn't have the time to ask, and the girl in front of me went stock-still. Her eyes never left mine now, perhaps too scared to look at them and give herself away — as if there were any doubt either of us had any idea what was going on.

Do something do something do something I have to do something

Less than a minute had passed since I first saw the girl, and already I knew it was too late. I tried scanning for exits, the only thing I could think of at this point. There was no way I was running at the team in front of me, nor was I turning around to face the one in the back. With them so close, I couldn't waste time trying to decide where I wanted to go.

The stall owner spoke to me, but I didn't hear it. Blood was pumping past my ears so loud I barely acknowledge anything else. I couldn't even tell if the people behind me were walking closer or not.

Then I saw it. An alleyway to my right, across the street between two stores. But it seemed so far away, too close to the team in front.

Could I make it before they cut me off?

Or would I break out into an asthmatic fit before I even made it halfway there?

The girl would have an easier escape, I figured. The apple cart was right on the street corner, and to the left was a side street, narrow but doable. Hopefully these guys didn't have any guns.

I thought maybe the stall owner would ask me something again — but instead he seemed to notice the others surrounding us, made an odd strangled noise, before darting back into the store.

That was all I needed to know.

I looked at the girl. We held each other's gaze for a long moment.

She nodded. Just once.

We ran.
Chapter Ten

Thanks for the lovely responses, guys! It's very encouraging. And yes, we'll start to see some familiar characters very soon :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Ten

✮

Everything happened at once.

The girl and I turned simultaneously — her to the left, me to the right. I took off, full-tilt sprinting.

I wasn't even looking where I was going when I started to run, I was too busy watching the dark-haired girl disappear down the side-street before I remember I should be looking where I was going.

I turned my head just in time to see the red-haired woman jump in my path, her arms outstretched to grab me.

I gasped, swerved around her, nearly tripping over my feet in the process. I thought for sure my clumsiness would be the end of it, that I'd feel those hands clamp down on my arm.

Only her fingers swiped past me, inches away but too far, too slow. I couldn't believe it as I stumbled forward, my arms flailing as I tore down the street, going as fast as my legs could take me.

...which turned out to be pretty fast, actually.

I swung around the corner, nearly overshooting it because I underestimated my momentum. I grabbed the corner of the building to swing myself around and propel myself forward.

My hand let go a split second before the brick exploded, shattered by bullets. The sound of gunshots rang out behind me and I cried out, pulling my hand back to my body. Holy shit, they *did* have guns!

But *why*? I wasn't dangerous! Why did they need to shoot me?

I didn't have time to think about. *Just keep going, you idiot! Don't slow down!*

The alleyway stopped at a wall, went into two directions. I had no idea how fast I was going — and my shoulder slammed into the wall. I gasped, surprised, before bouncing off. Without thinking, I went left.

I had no idea what I was doing. I just had to get away.
The alleyway, which I was beginning to think was a maze, split off in different directions again. It extended down maybe a block, walls so tight that I couldn't hold out my arms all the way. Hearing footsteps behind me, I took the first right I saw.

My feet flew over the dirt and cobblestones. *Paff! Paff! Paff!*

The building walls blurred around me. The world moved too fast. I looked down at the ground, watching as my white shoes snapped in and out beneath me.

It was so light, so easy. And yet so hard. My arms flailed, my knuckles bashing off the walls because I had no idea how to freaking run. Holy shit, I hadn't this fast since I was on Peter's skateboard. I didn't even know I *could* go this fast.

I glanced behind me. I didn't see the team chasing me. Was I actually *outrunning* them?

My lungs should hurt. I knew that. But they didn't. Climbing up a flight of stairs winded me; I shouldn't even be *breathing* right now, but here I was, in an all-out sprint, like I was being chased by a T-Rex, and I wasn't slowing down.

...In fact, I might just be getting faster.

I swallowed air by the mouthful. More air than I've ever breathed in my life. Instead of choking it down, it just flowed.

No cotton in my throat, no soda straw and smoothie.

Just air.

How was this happening? I've never felt this good in my *life*.

Unfortunately, answering that question right now might be difficult. As I turned another corner, I was confronted with a very bad sight: a chain-link fence blocking the way.

There was no way around it. No other turns, and I didn't even consider double-backing. I had to climb it, but the fence had to be at least ten feet, if not more. I barely graced five, how could I get myself over that?

"Crap!" I skidded, slowing down, but not stopping. My momentum still carried me forward, slamming me into the fence — but instead of letting it stop me, I grabbed it, hauled myself up. I'd seen Peter do it thousands of times, cutting through alleyways to get home faster. How hard could it be?

With a huff, I tensed my arms, hooked my fingers in the loops, stuck my toes in and pushed myself upwards — my legs took me higher, my reach was longer than I expected. In less than two seconds I was already at the top. So... Not hard at all, in fact. It was easier than climbing a ladder, and even though the chain-link bent and wobbled beneath me, it held as I scrambled up, and with one incredible haul I vaulted myself up over the top and down to the other side.

I landed in a somersault I didn't even know I could do, before recovering into a run again.

"Ha-ha!" laughter broke out of my mouth despite myself; what, did I just do *that*? And I didn't eat shit? That was so cool! Guess that fence wasn't so tall after all.

Still amazed and bewildered, I looked behind me as I left that once-presumed-insurmountable fence behind. I was pleased by the sight of the team of four crowding at the chain-link as they tried to get...
over it at the same time.

The woman uttered a frustrated growl as the four of them came to an abrupt stop. They're collective clambering made it impossible for anyone to get over.

So instead, she raised her gun, and a loud bang echoed down the cramped walls, followed by a window shattering. My laugh was quickly cut off by broken glass raining down on my head.

I cried out, raising my arms over my head to protect myself, closing my eyes and hoping I didn't step on it.

In that split second of blindness, I tripped over some garbage. The bags cushioned my fall (although the smell kind of ruined any appreciation I'd have), and by the time I picked myself up again, one of the men had already gotten over the fence.

I saw him charging at me and scrambled back up to my feet, breath caught in my throat as panic gripped me.

I didn't remember to breathe again until I broke out of the alleyway onto another street. I slowed down to look both ways trying to figure out where to go, uphill or downhill — before a car honk had me diving out of the way, still in the middle of the road. The driver yelled at me, shaking his fist out the window.

"Sorry!" I held up my hands as I sidled around the bumper. Another gunshot had me taking off again.

The driver started swearing when the bullet knocked off his side mirror, but I didn't hang around to see what happened next. I went down downhill, the path of least resistance, throwing myself right into traffic because I was a complete and total idiot who thought that might somehow slow down my pursuers.

The traffic was heavy here; one last glance over my shoulder revealed two of my four pursuers coming out of the alleyway. They'd just turn their heads and I saw them point at me, shouting — before I ran behind a delivery truck and cut off their line of sight.

Taking advantage of this, I made a sharp turn right before they could see which way I went. Down another alley I went, opening to another street, with a set of stairs to my right, wrapped around a building.

I took the stairs, desperate to throw them off my tail. I bounded up the steps three at a time, swinging around the corner and up another flight, before finding myself on the small garden roof of a three-story building. There was no one up here except for a collection of dead potted plants and some lawn chairs. I paused for a second, catching my breath and trying to decide what to do next.

To my left was the fourth and fifth floors of the apartment building, too high for me to scale. To my right to the building on the other side of the alleyway I was just in. The gap was maybe ten feet, but the other roof was lower.

I couldn't believe I was actually thinking of this. Was I really going to jump across buildings? That was something I only saw crazy parkour artists do in New York.

But what other option was there? I wasn't going to go inside this building, I wasn't going to trap myself in tight rooms and hallways.

No. I had to keep going.
But the only way to keep going was to jump. The thought sent jitters through my system, and I almost gave up right then and there. There was no way I could do this. I wasn't that stupid. I could get hurt! This could all go so wrong so quickly!

It could also go wrong if I got caught.

Hating myself and hoping my stupidity didn't get me killed, I took a deep breath. Then I grimaced, and charged the end of the roof.

I crossed the space in less than a second, faster than I anticipated. I almost forgot to lift my foot, to step onto the low ridge before leaping off.

The wind rushed past my ears as I threw myself into open air. The alleyway gaped open beneath me, like that maw of Charybdis, hungry monster ready to swallow me whole. A long drop that I would not survive — at least not without a few broken bones.

Vertigo hit me, dizzying and nauseous. My heart leapt into my throat. My mind blanked. This was it. This was how I died.

It passed beneath me. For a split second, I spotted two men in black passing in the street, who did a double-take when they saw me leaping across. I didn't have time to think about that before the other roof rushed up to greet me, a blur of hard terracotta and dusty brick.

"There she is!" I heard them shout below me.

Whumph!

I gasped as I landed on the balls of my feet only to overbalance and fall forward. I threw out my arms to protect my face, and fell hard on my stomach.

I grunted, the air knocked out of my lungs, and I lay there, breathless for a moment. The shock of the fall reverberated through my body, hurting mostly my chest, and a new twinge in my back reminded me that I had been shot. And might still be soon.

With one last look over my shoulder, I picked myself up and kept going.

I made it across exactly one roof before the ground in front of me exploded — two gunshots rang through the air. My heart skipped, the sound piercing my ears — like thunder, deep in my head.

"Stop right there!"

I came to an abrupt halt, skidding and breathing hard. Heart racing, I threw up my hands, turned around slowly to see who stopped me.

I thought it might've been one of my pursuers who somehow managed to flank me, but I was surprised when I came face to face with a man in armor, wielding a large rifle. One of the roof guards, like I'd seen earlier at the hospital.

He looked angry, an expression I couldn't comprehend. "Get on your knees!" He shouted, gesturing with his gun. Pointed at me. At me.

"Please, you can't —"

"Get on your knees!" He repeated, stepping for and raising his gun. I thought he'd shoot me, but instead he struck me across the shoulder, forcing me down. "Do it! Now!"
"Okay, okay!" I winced, biting back a cry. I could feel my eyes burn, a lump forming in my throat; terror and confusion overwhelmed me. No ever treated me like this before, not so harshly, not so violently. I never thought about how awful it was to be struck by someone I didn't know. I wanted to explain that this was an accident, just a big mistake, that he had no reason to point the gun at me — that I was no danger, why was he treating me like I was a danger.

"Put your hands on your head," the guard ordered, leveling his gun back at my head. I couldn't take my eyes off of the barrel, the hole raised to my brow. It was so huge, the bullets it carried could probably take off my entire head. Hands shaking, I did as he ordered. I could feel a headache forming between my eyes.

I opened my mouth to protest — to say anything so he wouldn't kill me, that I was lost, I was American, that I was being chased.

But before I could say anything, another gunshot rang out. But not from the guard, whose head jerked forward. I yelped, surprised, as he fell, suddenly limp, to the ground, revealing a hole in the back of his head.

Behind him appeared my two pursuers — one bearded, the other wearing a green kerchief. The bearded one had his pistol aloft, its muzzle still smoking. We stared at each other for one long moment.

What the hell are you doing? Run, damn it!

My senses returned to me, and I scrambled to my feet.

At the sight of them, I scrambled to my feet — but before I could get away, Green Kerchief lunged forward, grabbing me by the arms as I attempted to get away.

"Oh, no, no, no!" he grunted, smiling a little as I cried out, tried kicking him, but he had me pinned in a second, one arm around my neck and another my middle. "You're not getting away from us this time, Солдатка."

Soldatka. The word sent a shiver of frisson down my spine. I heard that word before, but I couldn't remember where.

"Let go of me!" I snapped, twisting this way and that, getting hair in my face. My chest hurt, and the sob that I was holding down was threatening to break free. The only thing keeping me from totally breaking down was a strange electric feeling in my veins, the same feeling that had me kicking and fighting, even though I knew I should just be trying to talk to them, to explain that there must be a big mistake. "I'm not who you think I am! Let me go!"

"I can't believe it's still alive," Green Kerchief grunted, trying to keep a hold of me. He had to readjust his grip every few seconds. "You'd think two bullets would be enough us normal folk, but I guess not, huh?"

"Didn't you read the file?" The bearded one asked, throwing his compatriot a skeptical look as he holstered his gun. "This thing isn't normal. None of them are. Lucky for us, it's not as smart as the other two."

Then, to me, he sneered and said, "Did you really think you could escape the Crucible so easily? The Chairman doesn't tolerate deserters or rebels."

"You don't get it! You have the wrong person!" I shook my head. The Crucible? The Chairman? None of that sounded familiar. "Please, you have to believe me. I'm American, I'm not supposed to
be here. I don't know what you're talking about."

"Oh, is that so?" The bearded man tilted his head, smiling, stepping closer. So calm, so casual, watching a girl tremble and shake in fear as though he were enjoying it. It made me sick, but not as much as what he said next. "Then how is it you can speak Sokovian?"

"W-what?" I stared at him, freezing in surprise. I hadn't even realized we weren't speaking English. Just like in the hospital, it had been so natural, it hardly felt different. But now that he said it, I realized he was right. The words he spoke and the words I said weren't English in the least. I didn't even know how to switch back. "I don't—I don't understand…"

"It's alright," the bearded man said, in what seemed to be an attempt at kindness, but only came across as condescending. "Once you're back under our roof, we'll make sure you'll never be confused again."

"Just make it easy on yourself, Amelia," Green Kerchief said in my ear and I froze. Suddenly, I was breathless, like I'd been punched in the gut.

There was no mistake. They knew who I was.

My head continued to pound, worse than before. I watched blankly as the bearded one pulled out a case from his pocket. Unzipping it, revealed a syringe, needle, and vial of clear liquid. I seized at the sight of this, but Green Kerchief held on, continued, "Don't fight this. If you can admit your shame for disobedience, for trusting your so-called friends, the Chairman can be made to see forgiveness. He's not unreasonable. Loyalty is always rewarded."

The bearded man fixed the syringe and needle, before drawing up 30 ccs of that strange liquid. He brought it up to my arm, and Green Kerchief pulled up my sleeve to reveal the skin underneath. I tried to fight it, but he still had me pinned, and it only made the Bearded man draw closer.

The Bearded man looked me in the eye and asked, "Last chance, Amelia. Would you kindly be a good little soldier and shut the hell up?"

I paused, meeting the Bearded man eye to eye.

"No."

Then my legs raised, knees bent, seemingly of their own accord. Green Kerchief swayed back, surprised, as my weight was suddenly redistributed entirely onto him. I watched in dazed bewilderment as I locked my ankles around the Bearded one's hand.

Then snapped it to the left.

_Crack!_

"Augh!" The bearded one grunted in pain, bending down over his broken wrist, having dropped the syringe.

At the same time, I whipped my head back, head a loud _crunch_ as the back of my head connected to Green Kerchief's nose.

Green Kerchief cried out, but the blow only loosened his grip, instead of releasing me.

But it was enough.
One arm came loose, and I slammed my elbow back into his gut, heard the gasp as I knocked the air out of him. Thrusting out with my arms, it was so, so easy to break through his hold. In fact, I had done it with enough force to knock Green Kerchief back, and he stumbled back, one hand over his bleeding nose.

I raised my fist to finish him off, but heard a click behind me.

One glance over my shoulder. Bearded one was getting back up, pulling out his gun with his good hand, bringing it up on me.

I didn't even pause to think. Instead, it felt like I was at the mercy of an invisible puppet master, controlling my every move with seamless choreography. I threw my weight back on one foot, lifted the other, swiveled my hips and shoulders at the same time. The motion spun me around, my foot swinging through the air. My heel made direct contact with his hand, knocking it away just as he pulled the trigger.

The bullet shot wide, past my head. The gun fell.

The bearded one grimaced, his mouth opening in a shout of rage. It ended when my follow-up, a fist, smashed into his jaw.

He dropped, face-first, into the ground.

"Dammit!" Green Kerchief cried — I whipped around, startled by the sudden switch to English. I almost forgot what it sounded like until I heard it, but reacted immediately when Green Kerchief whipped out a metal baton.

Nose still bleeding, he lunged at me, swinging hard. I thought it'd hit me, crack against my skull — instead, I ducked. His arm swung over my head, and I reached up to grab it. Twisting myself around so his chest slammed into my back, a move that would typically leave me crushed, instead had me bending down, taking Kerchief with me.

His weight and momentum sent him flying over onto his back in front of me, landing on top of the already fallen Bearded one.

The baton had dropped. Green Kerchief was still moving, reaching for the fallen weapon. Without thinking, I grabbed it first, jumped to my feet, and struck him across the head.

He went still.

I stood over them, gasping a little, barely out of breath. Two men, over six feet tall, totaling 400 pounds, armed with weapons.

Taken down in less than ten seconds.

By me.

I dropped the baton, horrified. Stumbling back, I brought my hands to my mouth, then away again, staring at my palms as if they no longer belonged to me.

My hands shook now, when only a second ago they had delivered powerful, deliberate blows. There was no way I did that. There was no way Mia, the tiny asthmatic thirteen-year-old with a weak immune system and fragile bones, who never laid a hand on anyone in her entire life, who wouldn't hurt a soul, didn't have the heart to, could take down these two men.
The worst part was how efficient it was. How quick, how easy. How I didn't even have to think.

It had been instinct.

An instinct I didn't have before.

"No, no..." I shook my head, looked back at the scene before me. I swallowing at the lump in my throat, clutching my head as it throbbed. The gunshots still echoed in my ears, knocked around inside my mind. "N-not possible. Not logically possible."

But there was no logic to be found here.

The air was quiet, calm again. No one else had witnessed what just happened — I was still questioning if it even happened at all. Was this real? Did I really do that?

Two unconscious bodies. One dead one.

There was still more of them out there. These...whoever they were. Soldiers, agents? They almost sounded like spies, but...well, it couldn't be spies. How the hell would I have ever gotten involved in that? This kind of stuff only happened in movies. It wasn't real life.

But apparently fact was stranger than fiction. And I couldn't deny what happened here.

Neither would anyone else, once they stumbled upon this.

I had to go. Now.

I turned and started to run.

You'd think there wouldn't be anywhere else to go. Turned out I still had energy left to bound across a couple roofs; my motions were more erratic now, fueled by a panic I couldn't quell. Before, I had been scared of my pursuers, my panic certain and true, knowing that I had to get away, to survive somehow.

Now, I was scared of myself. And that was one thing I couldn't run away from.

But I could try.

I ran as far as I could along the rooftops, running into tables and chairs, knocking over plants, startling a woman taking down her laundry. I could only offer a curt, honest apology before stumbling away again, horrified of maybe hurting her, too. Who knows, what if I just lost it, what if my body just started attacking every one of its own accord?

I didn't get tired, even after everything that happened. A scary thing, in its own right. I just kept running.

Eventually, I came to the end of the road. The only way was down.

I skidded to a stop at the edge, breathing hard. I couldn't very well jump, I wasn't suicidal. I was three stories up, and the only way off was a rickety old fire-escape. That'd probably take time, and for some reason now that I slowed down, I didn't want to keep running. I wanted to hide. I was out of sight from the rest of my pursuers, I should at least find a place to hunker down, make sure they were off my trail.

I scanned the buildings around me. In front was a wide street, one of the main paths in the city. Left and right were smaller ones, residential areas filled with shorter buildings, some lone-standing
houses. I seemed to be in the suburbs of some sort. Whatever city this was.

Then, along the larger street, I saw a run-down old brick building. One of the walls had crumbled at the top, leaving a caved roof, and the doors and windows were missing. It might've been an office building once, something real fancy with its stonework and large entrance. There was an old sign above the doorway, paint stripped away and made unreadable by years of weather. No one seemed to have inhabited it for a while.

In New York, you didn't go into abandoned and condemned buildings because you weren't stupid or desperate. Places like that was filled with dangerous stuff; nails on the floor, broken glass, asbestos, lead paint, shaky foundation. One wrong move could bring the whole thing down on top of you.

Peter liked exploring them, especially the old factories and mills still left in Manhattan. They turned out to be a great source of cool,arty photos.

And in this case, they also provided a good hiding spot for those who didn't want to be found.

I made my way down the fire escape, careful not to cut myself on any sharp edges. I was still shaken, and I didn't trust my body to do what I wanted it to do anymore, so I took special care not to do anything frivolous. When I finally dropped down to solid ground, I wilted in relief.

Then I entered the street, drifted into pedestrian traffic, keeping my head down, my shoulders hunched and arms wrapped around myself, where I knew they couldn't touch anyone.

I kept an eye out for the rest of the team, but didn't spot them. So, I made my way towards the rundown building and, when no one was looking, ducked inside.

It was dark in here. Smelly, too. Mold and dust, a lingering stench of decay. Not as bad as it could've been, to be honest, and I found it tolerable enough considering the situation. I shuffled slowly through the first floor; the stairs had collapsed, not that I wanted to climb them anyways.

I startled a family of squirrels when I entered the back room. It was large, a high ceiling supported by columns. My theory of it being an office building was confirmed by the number of overturned and broken desks lying around. Loose rubble lied around, the floor covered in dirt and dead leaves and other miscellaneous trash. There were a few broken beer bottles, like some loiterers spent their free time here.

My legs finally had enough, and I collapsed against the far wall, my thoughts scattering as everything that happened crashed down on me at once. Lost, confused, frozen and shot, strange city and strange reflections, men with guns and revolutionaries and bombs and the Crucible and the Chairman and my hands my head it hurts it hurts so bad why can't I remember—

I choked on my breath, tears suddenly welling in my eyes. My toe catching on the sidewalk and I stumbled, but caught myself against the corner of a building.

Gasping, I swallowed a breath, trying to force down the lump in my throat. I leaned against the wall, bring up my arms to cover my face, bring darkness around my eyes so I didn't have to see this awful world anymore.

Maybe if I closed my eyes, I'd wake up. Maybe if I just waited, this would all be over, and I'd wake up in my bed, back in New York City, home and safe again.

Mom would be there. She'd have chicken soup, because I was still sick. Sick enough to cough up blood, to choke on it, to collapse and die —
It didn't happen. This nightmare was real. Real as the cold air biting my cheeks, the rough cobblestone beneath my feet, the loose grit of the brick wall beneath my fingers. It didn't fade, even as my chest constricted, even when I felt tears burning down my face, even as I started breathing so fast I thought I'd hyperventilate and incur another asthma attack.

I was trapped. And this time I didn't have Mom to wake me up.

The sensation of helplessness overwhelmed me. My hands were in my hair, pulling and yanking. What was all this? Why was this happening? Why couldn't I wake up? What was the Crucible? Who was the Chairman? What did he want with me? Why was I so important that men had to point guns at me, had to chase me down and try to stick me with a needle? Nothing I did warranted that. I wasn't special. I was just a sick girl who needed help, who needed to go home.

Home.

The thought of Mom and Peter and Aunt May and Uncle Ben sent another wave of tears down my cheeks. I missed them. I missed the cramped little apartment, my bed and its dozens of covers, I missed Stitch and the photos Peter gave me, I missed Mom's food, I missed the sounds of New York, I missed knowing the feeling of belonging somewhere. Of somewhere belonging to me.

Now I was a stranger in a strange city. I was a stranger to myself.

And there was no one here to help.

I was alone.

I thought I knew that feeling before. Being the only person like me that I knew. Always sick, always coughing, always on the verge of death, of being that pity story, of never being up to snuff.

I never realized what it actually felt like to be alone. Before was loneliness, isolation while being surrounded by people I knew; not good, but not terrible, either. My family was always there if I needed them.

Not anymore. Now I knew what it meant to be alone.

It meant being afraid with no answers. It meant not knowing how to find them. How to get home. It meant knowing that the people you cared about also had no idea where you were, because like hell I'd still be here after two years if Peter had anything to do with. Or my mom.

And the worse thing about it? The people who did know me, who did know my name? They wanted to hurt me.

I coughed, throat ragged from the sobbing. I wiped at my face, my sleeve already soaking and not doing much good now. It was bad enough that I couldn't concentrate on my own surroundings, didn't pay attention when I heard footsteps — multiple ones, in fact — coming closer and closer.

One loud crunch of boot on dried leaves, crackling in the air, loud and suddenly very, very close. I jumped, startled, and suddenly I was in a panic again, heart skipping a beat, thinking it was those men again, having caught up with me.

I clutched at my shirt, biting at my lip and trying to quell my sobs, my breathing, keep from making any noise at all. They couldn't find me. Not now. Please, not now.

As the newcomers drew nearer, I realized something in the back of my mind. Something was different. Not wrong, necessarily, but different. The footsteps were too light. Not from someone
moving carefully, but from someone who was not a tall, heavy set man bent on chasing down a single girl throughout an entire city.

Still, I couldn't move. I pressed my back against the wall, staring as two shadows drew across the floor. They had already heard me.

There was nothing I could do as they came around the desk, finding me instantly.

It wasn't those agents.

It was a girl and a boy. Specifically, the girl in the red dress, her too-wide, gaunt eyes falling on me with a curious tilt of the head, bird-like. Next to her, a tall boy in a blue jacket, the ends of his hair bleached white. He had the same set to his mouth as the girl; serious, but with a quirk of mischief.

I stared at them, uncomprehending, tears still rolling down my face.

The girl stepped closer and bent down, so we were eye level. I flinched at the movement, and she hesitated, frowned. Then she held out a thin, pale hand.

And she asked, "Are you okay?"

Chapter End Notes

Idk if you can tell by now, but the Bourne Identity is one of my favorite movies, and it heavily inspired this fanfic. Also, there's another Bioshock reference in this chapter, because I can't contain myself.
I blinked at the girl, shivering. I almost didn't hear her words. Couldn't make sense of them.

"W-what?" My voice was hoarse with tears. My gaze flicked between the two, and my shoulders hunched, wary. Stuck in my little spot, they cornered me. I tried to shift away, wrapping my arms around myself. "Who are you?"

"What do you mean?" The girl frowned at me, her hand still held out to me. She had bony hands and prominent cheekbones, looking to be no older than me.

I didn't know if that should make me more or less afraid.

"I mean, who are you!" I snapped, but my tone was more fearful than angry. The outburst was loud, and I made myself jump. "How did you find me? What do you want?"

The two flinched, and the boy dropped to a crouch, raising a finger to his lips. "Shh! Keep your voice down, or they will find us."

The boy had a bit of stubble on his jaw, just starting to grow facial hair. He was a little harder to judge, being taller and more muscular than the girl, but his voice didn't sound very old. Like the girl, his clothes were worn, torn jeans and layered shirts, the top with a lightning bolt design on it, protecting him from the cold.

Considering they were both speaking Sokovian, as I was, I assumed they were from here. They had to know more of what was going on.

"Who's they?" I demanded, although I had a pretty good idea now. The same people who were chasing me before. The ones working for the Chairman, whoever that was. It occurred to me that they might know, so I leaned forward, my breathing ragged, gazing desperately at them. "Do you know what's going on? Do you know who they are? Please, I have to know."

The two exchanged confused looks, before going back to me. The girl said, "But you already know that, Amelia. You were there, with us. Do you not remember?"

"Remember what?" I said, my jaw tightening. There it was, my name again, in the mouth of a stranger. "How do you know who I am? Who told you my name?"
I hadn't let up with my harsh tone, and I guess that's not what they were expecting, because the boy and girl were shifting back a little, looking hesitant, maybe even afraid. The girl withdrew her hand, clasping them together, her fingers twitching. I would've felt a little bad about it, if I wasn't already on the verge of losing my mind.

The boy shook his head, his brow drawing together. "Because you told us. We're your friends. That's what you said."

"I — what?" I was stunned. Speechless. I had no idea what they were talking about. I had no idea who either of them was. I tried to think this through rationally. This had to be some big mistake, some awful misunderstanding that somehow had guns pointed at my head and me knocking out grown men with skills I didn't have.

I was at a significant disadvantage, I knew, by having lost my memory. These two could say anything and promise me it was true, and I wouldn't know the difference.

And yet it didn't seem as though they were lying. Like the agents, they had assumed I already knew what was going on. Unlike the agents, they hadn't immediately tried to attack me. I remembered the confrontation in the market; they had been after the girl, too. But why? What had we done?

There was also an earnestly in both their gazes that made me feel self-conscious, that they knew me better than I realized. My voice was little more than a whisper. "I said that?"

"Yes," The girl nodded slowly, giving me a look of appraisal. She looked me up and down, something crossing her face. I thought it might be concern, or fear, but it disappeared a second later when she set her face, suddenly certain. "You can't remember anything that happened to you? You do not know our names?"

"...Should I?"

The boy hung his head, muttering something under his breath. The girl tilted her head at him, listening, before her green gaze flicked back to me.

She exhaled softly. "My name is Wanda. Wanda Maximoff." she gestured towards her brother, and with the movement, her necklaces shifted, glittering in the light. From one, twirled a Star of David. "And this is Pietro. We are twins."

"Twins?" I repeated, my eyebrows shooting up as my mind was momentarily distracted. I looked between the two, taking in their appearance again. Brother and sister, fraternal twins. That explained the resemblance in their faces. The way they seemed in tuned with each other. "Oh. I guess that makes sense."

The boy, Pietro, perked up. "So, you do remember?"

"Um, no," I quickly shook my head, wincing at having to dampen his hope. "I just...I don't know. Maybe something. I've never met fraternal twins before."

Pietro flashed a grin. There was a cockiness, that tilt of his head, that made it strangely infectious. "You said the same thing the first time we met."

I tried to return the smile, but it was only half-hearted, and I had to break his gaze, the happy feeling quickly fading. I rubbed the side of my face with my sleeve as I concentrated on a small patch of dirt, drying the rest of my tears. My mind felt even again, the headache starting to fade. I didn't know if it was a good thing or a bad thing, but I felt a little better. Calmer, at least. Enough to get more complex thoughts in order.
I took a deep shuddering breath, praying I didn't break down again. I could feel it, at the edge of my throat, ready to cry at a moment's notice. "S-so you guys know what happened to me?"

Wanda and Pietro nodded in unison. Wanda reached out, put a hand on my knee, said earnestly, "Please, come with us. We know a safe place to hide, and we can explain everything. Okay?"

"It is not safe here, not on your own," Pietro added, with a furtive look over his shoulder. I glanced down, noticed how the heels of his shoes were nearly worn through. Black at the edges, as though scorched by friction. "The ones that chased you? They will come again, and they will not stop."

"But...why?"

"Come with us," Wanda pressed, not taking her eyes off of me. Her voice was light, but strong. Each word spoken with meaning. "Please. We are stronger together. Too powerful for them."

The logic appeared sound. I definitely didn't want to do this alone. Still, I felt hesitant. I didn't know if they were just avoiding my questions, or were too anxious to answer them right away. As it was, they were the only ones nice enough to even offer. I bit my lip, glancing at a dark corner as I collected my thoughts. Then, slowly, I began to nod. "...O-okay."

Wanda straightened, her eyes lighting up. Literally. I swore I saw a flash of red, but it was gone so fast I wasn't sure if I just imagined it. She grinned, "Yes? You will come with us?"

"Mm-hmm," I nodded again, as Wanda grabbed my hand with both of hers — a strange tingling sensation flying from her fingers — and pulled me up, backing out to give me enough space to get out of my little spot. A little startled, I stumbled forward, but Pietro caught me by the arm. Without meaning to, I flinched from his touch. After being grabbed by those agents, I didn't want to be touched.

It did not go unnoticed. Pulling his hand back, a look of hurt crossed Pietro's face, but he quickly masked it with a reassuring smile. "It is okay. We will not hurt you. We promise."

Wanda, however, didn't let go of me. She kept smiling, turning on her heel to leave the room, didn't seem to notice me trying to pull away. "Come! We know the perfect place to hide!"

"W-wait!" I managed to say, stumbling after her as I was nearly dragged out of the building. My mouth watered for food, and I could only think of the bread I still hadn't eaten, that I had dropped when those agents started chasing me. Waste of food and money.

Wanda came to a stop on the sidewalk, fixing me a curious look as Pietro checked both ways, keeping a look out. I gave a weak smile in return, before gesturing to my stomach, which was starting to cramp. "You don't, um, you don't have any food by any chance? I'm starving."

"Oh!" Wanda said, then nodded as if this made total sense. "Yes, you and Pietro always eat too much! Once we bring you to the safe place, we will find you food."

"I do not see them anywhere," Pietro said with a quick nod, his head darting this way and that, reminding me of a hummingbird. "Which is good. If I run —"

"No!" Wanda snapped, suddenly severe, earning surprised looks from both me and Pietro. She turned to him, shaking her head. "No, no running! That will make it easier for them to find us. And it will only scare —"

Wanda stopped herself, and I felt a strange sense of foreboding when the twins glanced at me in unison. Feeling like I was once again locked out of the loop, I asked, "...What? What's wrong with
Pietro running?"

"...Nothing," the two said at the same time. Pietro made a face. Wanda shrugged her shoulders sheepishly, "He is just...fast. Very fast. They will not catch him, but he is easy to follow."

"That makes no sense."

"It is fine! We will walk," Pietro said, a little too loudly, just as Wanda was about to interject. He just hopped impatiently on his feet, blue eyes alight with energy as he said, "Can we go now? I do not like staying in one place for too long. They have eyes everywhere."

Well, that's reassuring, I thought glumly, but said nothing as the twins led me away.

✮✮✮

"Here we are," Wanda held out her hand. "Is good, no?"

As it turned out, the twins hiding place was little more than another abandoned building; a theater hall, by the looks of it. The canopy over the doorway, once filled with hundreds of exposed light-bulbs, were all broken. Some of the words were still there, announcing the last show it had: December 31st, 1999 — The Nutcracker Ballet, which was longer in Cyrillic, a fact I was aware of this time around since some letters were missing, leaving me to fill in the blanks. That was a pain in the neck to read. I was only fifty percent sure I was right. Whatever had changed me failed to get rid of my dyslexia, too. Damn.

One of the entrance doors was broken, and bits of paper was scattered everywhere, old posters and pamphlets of old showings. The Imperial, I sounded out the sign at the top, chunks of it missing, metal scorched and black like it had been on fire at one point.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. The whole place had a sort of haunted feel to it, with the darkened windows and the utter lack of anyone in the area. The neighborhood we were in were filled with more buildings like this theater house, most hollowed out or rendered to brick and mortar. This was the only one that still had a roof.

But Wanda was looking at me expectantly, her green eyes wide. So, I made a weak smile, almost a grimace, and said, "It's...nice."

"Best place we ever had! Four stars!" Pietro grinned, nudging his sister before striding inside. Her laugh in return just made me concerned. It didn't sound like they were kidding.

Even though I didn't want to, I followed them inside, throwing one last glance over my shoulder at the empty street before the darkness of the theatre engulfed me.

Shivering, I looked around the lobby as we entered. The floor was once tile, now cracked and torn up, probably by the same battle or war that had ruined the rest of the city. Shattered glass was everywhere, along with broken furniture, old money, rolls of old tickets. Further in was the stage, the seating area, which had been stripped of most of its seats by previous looters. The red curtains of the stage were ratty and molding, but I had the feeling that this place must have looked amazing in its heyday.

Seeing it like this just made me feel sad. How could you ruin something like this?
The twins were talking to each other animatedly, apparently unaffected by the dilapidated state of the theatre. Their voices echoed up to the high rafters, and I came to a stop in the middle of the sloping aisle, looking up. The ceiling was painted blue, with tiny gold stars glittering in the darkness. Incredibly, that seemed entirely unaffected, the blue still vibrant, the stars marking constellations found in the real sky.

I found the Big Dipper, the North Star. It almost made me smile. It was startling how much relief I felt at seeing something familiar, even if it was just a pattern of stars.

"Amelia?" hearing my name brought me back to the present. I looked down again, saw Wanda waving at me from down by the stage. Her voice carried without her needing to raise it. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." I said, even though it wasn't true. I shrugged half-heartedly, looked way from the two, unable to hold their gaze, even if it was one of concern.

Pietro started to offer: "If you do not like this place, we can find another —"

"No, no, it's okay! I like it." I shifted nervously on my feet, not comfortable in the extended amount of attention I was receiving from two utter strangers. Even if I'd just met Wanda and Pietro, even though they held the answers I needed, I just wanted to be alone again. "You don't, um, happen to know if there's a bathroom, do you?"

"That way," Wanda pointed to the left, towards a door against the far wall. "There are back rooms, offices. Also a bathroom. It has running water. We checked."

I nodded once, and couldn't get out of the room fast enough.

The hallway was lit by flickering bulbs. I was surprised the electricity still worked in a place like this. There were a dozen doorways down this long hall, with a corner at the end, and at first, I was terrified of getting lost. I could still hear the twin's voices behind me. Somehow, that was more terrifying that reassuring.

Luckily, I found the bathroom quickly, and threw myself inside. All at once I was breathing hard, heart racing, head pounding. Maybe it had been this whole time and I just hadn't noticed. I slammed the door shut behind me, pressing my back against it, as if I were blocking out some terrible monster chasing me.

Then I looked up, saw the mirror, and yelped.

I didn't recognize the face staring back at me, wide-eyed and teeth bared. What I should be looking at was a small girl with sallow skin, barely five feet tall, with long ash blonde hair and hollowed eyes. I should see the bones in my shoulders and clavicle poking out, I should see the prominence in my cheekbones, the thinness of my neck, how my head looked slightly too big for my body.

But she wasn't there anymore. I couldn't take my eyes off the girl in the mirror. I slowly approached the sink, resting my hands on the ceramic rim — it came to my hips, when it should be at my chest. I leaned over it, peered at the face of this girl with a head that fit on her body, a neck that wasn't frail, shoulders broad and rounded with muscle. My cheeks had filled out, giving strength to my jaw, and there was a new fullness to my lips I had never seen before. They were a fresh pink, instead of the strange pale purple they'd usually been. I ran my hand over the shallow dimple in my chin, wincing as my fingers pressed too hard on a bruise.

I knew about the short hair, but it didn't frame my face right. It came down right below my chin, the
ends uneven, as if hacked at with kitchen shears. There was a thickness to it that I hadn't noticed before. Constant sickness usually made my hair brittle and dry. I guess being healthy meant your hair produced enough oils to look…okay-ish. I still wanted a shower.

There was a bruise under my right eye, a cut on my chin — from my wild chase through the streets of this city? I didn't remember getting them. They didn't even hurt. I reached up, touched the tacky blood drying on my skin, and flinched. Okay, it hurt. It hurt now that I knew it was there.

Not even my eyes were the same. Still the same gray, but there was something underneath them I couldn't read. And I couldn't comprehend this, the inability to read my own face, the one thing I knew for my whole life.

Then I saw the dots on my skin, sprinkled all over my face, neck, and shoulders. Wait, were those freckles? I never had freckles before!

Most of all, I reeled at how old I looked. I was still grappling with the fact I was fifteen, and I couldn't quite connect it with this new, mature body. I always wondered what I might look like as a healthy, pretty teenager — this was a tad more muscular than I imagined, not as curvy as I'd like. But at least I had the actual echoes of a feminine figure now. I’ll take my victories where I could get them.

I wasn’t sure if I looked fifteen. I wasn’t sure if anyone would be convinced if I told them.

My gaze flicked down my reflection, taking in everything one at a time. I could still feel that lump in my throat, but I momentarily forgot about it when I saw the patch of gauze peeking out from beneath my coat, hanging off my shoulder.

Looking down at myself, I pulled down the coat, took the edge of the tape with my fingers. The doctors had replaced the bandaging in the hospital while I was asleep, so I never got to look at what was underneath. It hadn't even occurred to me when I got out, I had been so preoccupied with other things.

But now I couldn't think of anything else. Slowly, I peeled off the bandage, and revealed what was underneath. I thought it would be another wound, like the bullet holes in my back.

It wasn't.

"What the hell?" I breathed, brow furrowing.

I had a tattoo.

A red star.

What was this? Who the hell would tag me with such a weird, random thing? There weren't even words or numbers. Just a plain red shape.

I checked in the mirror just to make sure I wasn't seeing things. But no, the tattoo was still there, a perfectly symmetrical, five-pointed red star inked permanently into my left shoulder. A good four-inches across my deltoid, it wasn't exactly subtle.

This was by far the strangest thing, at least to me. I prodded with my finger, and it came back slightly sticky. The skin was still sensitive when I touched it, raw. The tattoo was new, not more than a week old. Did I choose to do this? Why? Even if I ever wanted a tattoo (which I didn't), it sure as hell wouldn't be this. Something tickled in the back of my mind as I took it in, like the sharp ends of the star points were poking into that invisible wall blocking my memories. This was important. It meant
something. But what? Why would I choose this?

Looking back down at my shoulder, I noticed something else. On my wrist, keeping the coat down, was a strange ring of beige skin, darker than the rest. I pulled it away, ran my finger along the bumpy surface of the scar. I found a similar one on my other hand.

Holding them together, it looked like I'd been cuffed. Or chained.

I stared back into the mirror. At this girl whose face was familiar, but just different enough to scare me. With the wrong hair, the wrong body, the blood and scars. The tattoo.

And that's when I realized. This was me.

This stranger was me.

Not real not real not real this isn't me it doesn't fit not my body not me who am I

I started to shake. A shuddering breath left me throat, but I clapped a hand over my mouth. No, don't do this. Not now. Now while they can hear you.

I squeezed my eyes shut, blocked out this strange creature before me. I took a deep breath, a second one, then another. I managed to keep myself calm, long enough for the swelling panic to turn into something else. Anger.

With a huff of breath, I snapped my head around, breaking eye contact with my reflection, before bursting out the door and heading straight down the hall again.

"Who are you?" I demanded, striding back into the stage hall, my fists clenched. The twins, who had been sitting on the floor, turned to me in surprise.

They exchanged bewildered looks, slowly standing up. Pietro took a half-step in front of her, his brow drawing together at my sudden aggression, as though he intended to intercept me — but I came to a stop about ten feet away. I didn't want to get too close again until I knew who I was dealing with.

I also stopped because, well, Pietro was fast, faster than I expected. That half-step seemed to be made in a quick second, before I could even register it. He seemed to move with quick, jerking movements that set me on edge. It reminded me of the druggies you'd find in the city, all strung out and high at the police station.

But it felt wrong to judge. Pietro didn't act like a tweaker, and certainly didn't look like one. Good teeth, good hair, constant alertness, a bounciness to his step. It seemed more of an adrenaline junkie than a meth addict.

Wanda frowned, readjusting her shawl over her arms, giving me a nervous look up and down. "What do you mean? You already know who we are."

But I just shook my head, gritting my teeth. How could I be so stupid, acting like this? Here I was, in this weird new reality, and I was just going around, following people who claimed they knew me? I was smarter than that. "How do I know you're telling the truth? How do I know I can trust you?"

"What? How can we prove that if you don't remember?" Wanda said, holding out her hands helplessly. The pain in her face was real, and I felt a strange pulling in my gut for having made it happen.
It was guilt. I didn't know this girl. Why was I making her hurt? Whether I knew her or not, I didn't want to distress her. Peter once called me a 'bleeding heart' after I cried at the end of *Lilo and Stitch* the first time (in my defense, I was five). I didn't know where he learned that word, or get what he meant then, but now it was starting to click.

At the thought of Peter, I grimaced. I suddenly wished he was here, I wanted to listen to his jabbering, his jokes, anything to lighten the mood and make me feel better. Peter wasn't always the best at making friends, but he always knew how to diffuse a bad situation. He'd know what to do here.

I opened my mouth to retort, when Pietro's eyes widened, and put a hand on his sister's shoulder, saying, "Wait, wait, there was a thing. A... a password, yes? You told us once. It was...damn! What was it?"

"Oh, yes! Yes, I know what you are talking about," Wanda nodded quickly, turning back to me, looking between them, utterly confused. She stepped forward. "You gave us a word to use, because you were afraid of this happening to you. The...the loss, I guess. It was...it was *Ohana.*"

"Ohana?" I repeated, dumbfounded. It was so strange hearing a familiar word coming out of her mouth.

"Yes, *ohana,*" Pietro said. "You told us how prisoners of war shared words so they knew who to trust. This is same thing, yes?"

"But you never told us what it meant." Wanda said, frowning. The two stood together, awaiting my judgement with nervous eyes. "What does it mean?"

"It...it means family," I said slowly, still trying to wrap my head around this. *That* was the word I chose, the Other Me, the me I couldn't remember? At first, I had no idea why, but then it made sense. *Of course.* It was the phrase me and Peter agreed to use in case one of us was replaced by an alien imposter. "It's from my favorite movie. Me and my cousin used to watch it all the time when we were little."

"Family," Pietro mused, looking down at his sister. They shared unreadable expressions, something passing between them that I couldn't understand. I knew about the concept of twins having their own languages, but this one seemed to be without the spoken word, which just made everything weirder. It almost seemed...mental. Then Pietro looked at me again, said, "Does that mean you believe us, now?"

"I — yes," I almost wanted to back out of it, but reluctantly admitted so. I wouldn't just hand out something like my secret trust password to just anyone. "But why would I? Why would I tell you that? Why did you even find me?"

"Because you are our friend," Wanda said, frowning like I was being difficult on purpose. "You were...you were kind to us, when no one else was."

"And you helped us escape," Pietro added, then looked away. He worked his jaw, eyes squinting. It took me a moment to realize it might've been guilt. "You almost died, too. Because of us. We didn't mean to leave you behind, but..."

"You told us to go!" Wanda finished earnestly, closing the space between us to grab my arms. She looked up at me, shaking as her eyes glittered. "We did not want to, but we — there were too many of them. We were faster on our own. I wanted to come back for you, a-and we did! But you were just... gone. Pietro thought they took your body. But then I saw you, just today, in the market! I
thought I was — I thought I was *dreaming*. I wanted to say something, but I didn't know if it was really you or…"

She didn't finish her sentence, eyes drifting from my face to some in distinct corner of the room. Wanda just shook her head, pulled away from me again. My arms tingled from where her pinching grip had held me.

"Me or...who?" What was she talking about? Who else would I be? The possibility of there actually being imposters out there with my face (my *new* face) suddenly didn't seem so stupid anymore. My eyebrows shot up, and I hooked a thumb over my back. "Wait, you mean that's how I got shot? Breaking us out of...wherever we were? Wait, why were we — were we in *prison* or something?"

"The Crucible," Wanda hissed, the word falling off her tongue like a curse, her eyes flashing dangerously. She turned her back to me, crossing her arms as she spit over her shoulder. Clearly, not many happy memories there. She flicked her hand in the air, almost in dismissal. "That is where they experimented on us. And they brought you here, to Sokovia. They chose us. And now we are what we are."

"It was bad," Pietro added, walking over to his sister, taking her under one arm. She was rigid at first, but then leaned into him, sighing heavily. He gestured to me. "But you got us out. They told us that the Crucible was inescapable. But you proved them wrong."

I almost didn't hear the rest of it, because I got hung up on the word 'Sokovia'. "Wait, I'm in Sokovia? What — how — why? Why me? How can I do any of this? I'm just...I'm just Mia. I shouldn't even look like this! Hell, I should be dead! The last memory I had was choking on my own blood and being rushed to the hospital in an ambulance! Now I'm waking up, it's two years later, and you're telling me I orchestrated a prison break-out from this Alcatraz-Crucible place, and then I'm running at like fifty miles an hour through the streets of some weird-ass city —"

"Novi Grad," Pietro supplied helpfully.

"Novi Grad, whatever!" I threw up my arms, shaking my head. "I don't care! I'm not home! Someone kidnapped me! I don't — I don't understand any of this! I know what you're saying, that you think it's true, but it can't be! I'm just a girl from Hell's Kitchen, I don't do this sort of creepy sci-fi stuff. This shouldn't be happening to me! I just — I just want my mom!"

It sounded so pathetic, coming out of my mouth. What's worse, my voice broke, and I had to cover my face to keep myself from crying. I squeezed my eyes shut, turned my head away, and inhaled through my nose. I hated crying in front of people, even my own family. It made me feel weak. And crying for my Mom? God, I must look *pathetic* to them. How could I be the person they thought I was when I cried over every single damn thing?

Swallowing at the lump in my throat and wiping away the tears, I managed to catch my breath and find my voice again. Still, I couldn't look at them when I asked, in a croaking voice, "Is there...um, is there a phone I could use around here? I want to…"

I didn't finish, didn't want to embarrass myself further. But the two seemed to understand, and neither pushed me for any confirmation of what they said about me. There was a moroseness to their expressions now, maybe upset with the way I reacted.

Still, they didn't comment on it. Wanda directing me to an office up some stairs behind the stage. She guided me with her hand, black nail-polish chipped. I didn't look at her, couldn't, but could feel her eyes on me. What was she thinking right now? She must have realized by now that she made a big mistake, that I wasn't the same person I was before, or whatever I pretended to be before I forgot.
The office was about as well kept as anywhere else, although I noticed that the door was recently broken, thanks to the scattered dust lying around. Maybe Pietro did it. The desk had an ink mat on it, with a set of old calligraphy pens in front and two dried-out inkwells. What kind of person would use inkwells, unironically?

The phone was a rotary, too. I wondered just how old this stuff really was. This city seemed to be years behind the rest of the world.

"I'll wait for you outside," Wanda said softly, before going back down the steps. I nodded, not realizing until later how much I'd appreciate the privacy, and how I didn't need to ask for it.

Sitting down in the cracked leather chair, I reached for the phone and brought the receiver to my ear. Hearing the dial-tone was almost like heaven, and I quickly dialed my home phone number. It was the first thing I could think of — maybe I should be calling the police, the American embassy, whatever — but first and foremost, I needed to hear from Mom.

Somehow, I already knew the extension number, much like how I knew to throw a punch or kick someone so hard to send them across the room. I didn't know when or where I learned it; it was just there.

I tried not to dwell on that too much.

Tapping my fingers against the desk, I listened as the phone rang. And rang. And rang. I knew as soon as it hit seven that no one was going to pick up, but I was prepared to leave a message on the answering machine. Even hearing Mom's voice on the recording would've been enough for me.

Instead, I got something else.

"We're sorry," said the monotone female voice, in English. "But the number you have reached has been disconnected, please try again…"

"What?" I said under my breath, surprised enough to also switch to my native tongue. I pulled the phone away from my ear to frown at it. Disconnected? How could it be disconnected? We had a landline; how could it not be connected? Was there no service? Mom wouldn't forget a payment, and the landlord wasn't a complete ass on the rare occasion she didn't make it. "That doesn't make any sense."

I tried again, got the same response. A third time, then a fourth. Still the same message, over and over. The number you have reached has been disconnected…

Did Mom move out? Did she get a new place? Is that what some people did, after they lose a child? I didn't even know if she knew I was missing or not. What if she thought I was dead? I knew the statistics on kidnapping — survival rate for children dropped 90% after the first 48 hours gone missing. Well, two years was a hell of a lot longer than 48 hours… But even then, would Mom just give up like that? It just didn't feel right.

It didn't occur to me to try Peter until ten minutes later, and I got a second wind of hope. If anyone would pick up the phone, it'd be him.

I tried his cell phone, first. It was prepaid, and there was a chance Peter got a new one by now, but I prayed he kept the same number. The Parkers didn't keep a landline simply because it was cheaper to buy your own minutes on portable phones.

I got his voice-mail, and waited through his stupid-long message: "Hey, this is Peter! Or Maverick, Maverick's cool. You probably have the wrong number, because I don't have any friends. Ha-ha,
yeah...well, anyways, uh, if this is May or Ben, I swear I won't be late, and if it's Hedy, I promise I didn't kill anyone. And if it's Goose, well, I got your back. You know what to do!"

I smiled to myself, resting my chin in my hand as I listened to his familiar chirping voice. Peter had changed his voice-mail as soon as he came up with new nicknames for us. Hearing 'Goose' made me feel all warm and fuzzy inside, made me feel better after crying. Maybe things were still all right. He even called me by my nickname, which I'd completely forgotten about.

Then the beep came.

The tone became a little scratchy as it started record, and I was just about to exclaim "I'm still alive!" when I heard it.

*Clik-clik-clik.*

It was only for a split-second. But my ears still picked up on it, distinct from the otherwise normal white noise of the phone. My voice caught in my throat, nothing coming out.

"Hello?" Peter's voice. Curious, bright, exactly as I remembered him. So loud, so clear, like he was right next to me.

Like I was home again.

But that clicking. I breathed into the receiver, my heart skipping a beat. My eyes searched the room, hoping that wasn't what I thought it was. It couldn't be.

Could it?

The silence lasted for five long seconds.

"Hello?" Peter asked again, and my heart crumbled as my will to answer faded. "Is anyone there? Who is this?"

*It's me. Peter, it's me. Mia. Find me. Save me. Please. I want to go home.*

No.

I couldn't do it. With shaking hands, I carefully set the phone down, back in its cradle.

I sat back in the seat, my breath leaving my chest in a whoosh. Peter's voice, his words, still echoed in my head. My throat was locked with tears. I still couldn't quite believe it. I didn't want to. It had to be paranoia.

But in the back of mind, I knew it wasn't.

Peter's phone was bugged.
“Amelia?” Wanda’s small voice broke me out of my reverie.

My chin jerked up to look at her, and I got a little dizzy. I had been sitting in that chair, staring at the phone, for so long my butt was numb. Faint bird singing could be heard through the broken windows, a soft breeze coming through and rustling the leaves across the floor of the office. It was so utterly quiet I forgot that I wasn’t really alone.

To be fair, I was still pretty distracted by the whole disconnected line and bugged phone deal; of which I still didn’t have a reasonable explanation for either. What the hell did Peter do that earned him that kind of attention? What happened at home that meant I couldn’t call either my cousin or my mom?

I didn’t know. And halfway across the world, there was nothing I could do.

This frustration, this helplessness was only the cherry on top of this Nightmare Sundae.

Wanda’s head peered in through the door, her green eyes flicking up and down and taking me in. "Are...are you okay?"

I didn’t answer for a long moment. Realizing that a phone — which only this morning I would’ve hinged my entire life on — had now proven to be a dead end, I pushed the chair back and got up. "I'm fine. Do you have food?"

It was weird how my mind just went straight to that without any second thoughts. I didn’t think to explain to Wanda what just happened; I didn’t think she’d understand, wasn’t sure I wanted to tell her anyways. I still didn’t know if I could trust her and her brother or not.

"Yes!” Wanda smiled, apparently pleased by my question, how easy it was to answer (as opposed to before, about the Crucible and the Chairman). She gestured for me to follow. "Come! Pietro brought much to eat."

I smiled weakly at her, not as enthused. I didn’t really trust Wanda’s judgment on what she considered ‘much to eat’, if one took in their current lifestyle into account. But as it turned out, Wanda wasn’t kidding; I came back into the theater room to find Pietro by the stage and what looked to be two shopping carts of food piled around him, and more in his arms. He was already chewing through a bag of potato chips like logs through a wood chipper.

I could only stare as Wanda just walked right up and plucked an apple, bright red and fresh, from the pile and took a bite from it. I looked between them, their second-hand clothes, and asked, "Whoa. Did you buy all of that?"
The twins blinked at me, then looked at each other and burst out laughing. I could feel my cheeks grow hot; were they laughing at me? "What? What's so funny?"

"You think we buy all this?" Pietro gestured with his finger, circling at the food.

"And with what money?" Wanda finished with a snicker, covering her mouth.

At first, I didn't understand what they were saying. When it finally hit me, I shook my head, and grabbed a box of cereal, holding it up. "Wait, you stole this? You stole all this food? Guys, that's illegal!"

I felt stupid for saying it, and the fact that the twins were still smiling a little, looking at me as though I was overreacting. Wanda just shrugged her shoulders, snorting, "So?"

"So? What if you got caught? You'd get in so much trouble!"

But Pietro just tossed his head, smirking. "Pfft, I do not get caught. Besides, it is not as if we have money. We have no jobs. Did you forget we just escaped prison?"

"I-I just —" they had a point, of course. "It's not right. And it's dangerous! You even said so yourself, there are men out there looking for us. Getting caught stealing is only going to make it easier for them."

"Well, if you have better solution," Pietro said, raising an eyebrow. "Then please share."

"Never mind, then," I muttered, dropping the cereal box and scowling, turning my gaze away from them. What the hell could I say to that? I knew the problem went deeper than my own feelings, I just knew it, but I wasn't sure how to explain it, much less in a way that these two would understand. It was, I guess, a harsh wake-up call that these two weren't like me. They didn't think like me, they didn't care about the same things I did, and apparently what I still cared about was stupid now.

Frustrated, I just turned on my heel and walked back towards the staircase.

"Wait, where are you going?" Wanda called after me. "I thought you were hungry!"

"Yeah, well," I just flapped an arm in dismissal, not turning back to look at them as I disappeared up the steps. "I lost my appetite."

I didn't go back into the office. Instead, I wandered around, finding myself lost in thought again. The theater was a lot bigger than I first thought, and it didn't take me long to get lost. Which was fine, I suppose. I didn't really want to be found at that moment.

I ended up in what appeared to be a practice room of sorts, for ballet maybe. There were banisters sticking out of the floor as well as the walls, which were lined with mirrors. Said mirrors were now broken and cracked, so my reflection was left jagged, distorted, and twisted out of shape. Not that I could recognize it as anything else now.

The furniture in here seemed to have been brought in from somewhere else; there were a row of seats from the theatre hall that had been unceremoniously dumped in a corner. Footlockers were lined up along one wall, two broken into and the others looking rusted over. Along one wall were curtains; upon closer inspection, I realized that there were windows behind it, surprisingly unbroken. But the overcast white sky hurt my eyes compared to the soft darkness of the room; I stepped back and closed the curtains again. Instead, I flopped on the floor, beside a bench that wrapped around a column in the room.
I sighed, dropping my head into my hands. I hated the feeling of my hair flicking by my face, unweighted by its new, short length. I tried brushing it back, but it was too short to stay tucked behind my ear for long. It was, really, a minor frustration, but on top of everything else, it just made me feel worse.

I couldn't decide if I was really angry at the twins or not. I barely knew them, so it felt wrong to be so quick in passing judgment. And yet it felt like they knew exactly what they were doing. The way they acted, the look on Wanda's face, Pietro's laugh, combined with the weird idea of them knowing me on top of it all, when I knew nothing about them...it left me feeling off-kilter.

I felt like I was wrong for saying something, but I couldn't stop the righteousness I still felt over the matter. What the heck was I supposed to do?

And that's not to mention I was still hungry.

Still, I couldn't make myself get up and go back to them. It'd be like admitting I was wrong, that I needed their help as much as I didn't want to.

These thoughts swirled around in my head, and I got so lost in my reverie that I jumped when I heard the door open behind me. I glanced over my shoulder, looking up in surprise as Pietro slipped inside, his head bowed slightly in embarrassment. "Sorry, did not mean to scare you. Wanda said I could find you up here."

I could only nod dumbly before turning back to study my hands. It wouldn't be until later would I consider how strange it was what Pietro said. How did Wanda know where I was? Had she followed me?

I said nothing as Pietro slowly ambled over, coming to a stop a few feet away. There was some tension in the air as neither of us spoke; I sure as hell had nothing to say, and I didn't know why he came to find me. I still wasn't sure if I should really be calling the Maximoff twins my friends or not.

With a small huff, Pietro bent down into a crouch, so we were almost eye-level, although he stood just outside my peripheral vision, so I had to turn my head to look at him. It was then I noticed something in his hand, bright red against the gray and blue of his clothes. An apple.

"I thought you might still be hungry," Pietro admitted with a sheepish smile, when he saw me staring at the apple. He held it out to me, but I tucked my hands under my arms, looking away again. Maybe I was just refusing out of spite, but I didn't want it after the argument.

Pietro exhaled through his nose, his hand dropping away with the apple. He tossed his head, perhaps annoyed by my attitude. But there was a different tone in his voice when he spoke again a moment later.

"We did not mean to laugh at you," Pietro said softly, rolling the apple beneath his hand against the floor. I glanced at him; Pietro wasn't looking at me, now frowning at his ash-covered sneakers. "Sometimes I forget that you have lived differently than us, before the Crucible. I suppose life in America is much nicer than it ever was here."

I pulled my knees up, wrapping my arms around them as I pressed my chin against my shoulder, watching Pietro but only out of the corner of my eye. "You're from here? From Sokovia? That...couldn't have been easy."

From what I learned in history class, Sokovia wasn't exactly the nicest place to live ever since World War Two. To say it fell under hard times during the Third Reich would be a gross understatement; its
The subsequent liberation would then be followed by years of economic depression and political turmoil; a famine in 1956 left the entire country crippled and left it open for the USSR to take over. There were some minor improvements after that, if you consider a second takeover by a foreign country a good thing; but Communism brought jobs and food for a little, before the Korean War and the Suez Crisis kind of threw things out of whack again.

"It was...not perfect," Pietro admitted with a shrug, again with that self-deprecating smile that held more pain than humor. "But at least we had each other, and our parents. We always had food. We did not live in fear. Much has changed since we were little, you do not even realize."

"You must have been young when it happened," I muttered. It was kind of up-and-down again for Sokovia while the Cold War reigned, with the little European country getting the worst of it. Things didn't look up for Sokovia until as late as the 1990's, when the USSR was disbanded, bringing about an end to Communism and a rise to democracy and capitalism in Sokovia that was so desperately needed. It was good for about ten years, as Sokovia finally gained political and economic strength — when, on the eve of the 21st millennium, until Russia invaded once again. The New Year's Revolution. This happened in concurrence with the Yugoslav Wars, particularly the Croatian War of Independence.

"Five or six, I cannot remember," Pietro said, making a face as he tried to recall. "You learn fast when things changed. You learn, or you die. That, I guess, has not changed one bit."

The New Year's Revolution sparked a small uproar on the global scale — the president at the time, Alexei Krotopuskov, had declared Sokovia to be ancient territory from way back in the medieval days, and was apparently trying to reclaim its heritage or however they spun it for the propaganda reels. America and the UN provided aid to Sokovia with weapons from Stark Industries, which had already been ahead of its time back then; Russia backed off and, as far as anyone was concerned, Sokovia had been at peace ever since.

Least to say, Sokovia had been the punching bag of world history.

"That is why we steal," Pietro said, meeting my gaze, his expression entirely serious, if not a little forlorn. "We came from the Crucible, and know little. What else can we do but survive?"

I nodded slowly, having to pry my eyes away from him, too embarrassed with myself. I was like a fish out of water, and nothing made sense. I knew it was wrong to steal; that wasn't any different then or now. We had so little money, if any at all. What could I do? Get a job? I had no intention of staying here long enough for that to happen. And being hunted on top of it all? That doesn't reconcile easily with staying behind the law.

"You still don't think it is okay," Pietro guessed accurately, perhaps judging the look on my face. He raised his chin, a line forming between his brow. "Would you not steal, even if it meant you would have to sleep with empty stomach?"

"I..." I started, then closed my mouth when I couldn't come up with an answer. Then, before I could think of anything else, my stomach growled. I placed a hand over my abdomen, flushing red while Pietro smirked.

"Well, if it eases your conscience," Pietro said with a small chuckle, before his features smooth again. He flicked his hand, and the apple rolled over, coming to a stop by my foot. "You are not the one stealing."

Then with a huff, he planted hands on his knees and stood up, moving out of sight behind me. Picking up the apple, I studied its surface as I listened to his footsteps scrap against the floor, softly
fading out before the door closed. I still wasn't happy with it; if I ate this apple, wouldn't I be profiting off a crime? Would that make me complicit?

Did it even matter anymore?

My stomach growled again and it was then I finally gave in and bit into the apple. The skin broke beneath my teeth, the pulp tart and juicy on my tongue. I couldn't resist any longer after that, and the apple was gone in less than a minute. All thoughts of it being stolen were dashed from my mind when my stomach took over. My hunger didn't care if it was stolen or not, the apple tasted exactly the same as any other, regularly bought apple.

When all I held was the core in my hand, I felt shame in the pit of my stomach. Bitterness bubbled up from where the sweetness had initially been. But I swallowed it down; the apple was mine, I ate it, and it was too late to be having second thoughts now.

Standing up, apple core in hand, I went back to the curtains, pushing one aside and opening the window behind it. My broken reflection followed me where I went in this room, mimicking my movements like it had any right to pretend to be me. I couldn't make myself look at it for very long without starting to feel a wave of panic and pressure in my chest. I supposed I could always go into another room, but I was afraid of running into the twins again, and I wasn't ready for that just yet.

Below, the street was empty as usual. I took in a breath of fresh air, feeling a little better. Looking out made me feel a little less trapped in the small room. Lonely scraps of paper blew in the wind, spiraling across the Tarmac in small tornados. I could see more of the city from up here, saw how the low buildings stretched on for what seemed like a mile or more. Mountains framed the horizon, trapping the Novi Grad in a small valley. It would've felt like paradise, I suppose, a haven safely hidden from the rest of the world. If only it wasn't so gray and lifeless, I might've actually felt safe here.

Pulling my arm back, I pitched the apple as hard as I could, grunting with the effort. My hands were still sticky, but I felt some catharsis when I watched the apple soar into the distance.

Going…

Going…

Gone.

The core grew so small in the distance I could no longer see it, but by then it was already a far distance away, not yet overtaken by the buildings. I frowned to myself, a little taken aback. I didn't know I could throw that far. Even for an apple, there was quite some velocity to that throw.

Huh. Maybe I was stronger than I thought.

I shrugged to myself, stepping back and closing the window again, then the curtain. Having a good pitching arm was less weird than being able to take down two full-grown men. I had yet to experience anything that could top that.

Maybe I could try out for the Women's Major League when I got home.

The thought sent a strange burst of laughter out of my mouth. Me? Baseball? Any sport at all? It was hardly a thing I'd even dream of. If I actually made it on a team, Mom would probably cry tears of joy.

The strange sensation of amusement was gone as soon as thoughts of Mom returned. I pressed my
lips together, forcing myself not to start crying again. There was nothing worse than not having your parents just when you needed them the most.

I sat back on the floor again, now designated as My Spot. I couldn't bring myself to go back to the twins, even if it would assuage my deep-seated loneliness.

Instead, I just tilted my head back to rest against the cushion of the bench, all the while ignoring my reflection in the mirrors. I closed my eyes, hoping against hope that this might all turn out to be some horrible nightmare.

Chapter End Notes

Some of the history is true, some made up for Sokovia since it's not actually a real country. Also, as is typical with the MCU, the political figures of recent years don't match that with real world history. As Obama is replaced by Ellis, so was Yeltsin/Putin replaced by Krovopuskov. This is to avoid unfortunate implications. The fictional counterparts aren't meant to represent anyone in real life.
Chapter Thirteen

Chapter Summary

For What It's Worth // Malia J.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TA4-teCZ9kI

Chapter Notes

(I'd like to thank good_morning_vietnam for introducing me to the show Man in the High Castle - they inspired the 2nd half of this chapter. Actually, they inspired the general setting of Sokovia, although not entirely the same.)

Chapter Thirteen

✮

I couldn't sleep.

Sleeping on a floor was a new low for me. I grew up knowing that sometimes it was either food or medication. There were times in the past where I went to sleep, wondering if my mom had enough to eat, if she lied and gave me her food because she didn't want me to worry.

I never kidded myself on the fact that I was poor. That my mom was poor. Our whole family, really. I remember it used to bother me, sometimes. Not having nice clothes every season. Always buying from thrift stores; not because it was trendy, but because it was all we could afford. Not being as clean as everyone else. Not being able to eat or just go for ice cream with friends, because I didn't have that kind of change. I never had an allowance. No vacations, ever. The best we could do sometimes was a weekend in a motel on Long Island; or somewhere exotic, like Jersey City.

And most of the time, it didn't even bother me at all, because being as sick as I was just rearranged those priorities automatically. They made me forget I had anything else to worry about.

When you needed a nebulizer to use every night, so you didn't have to worry about getting an asthma attack in your sleep, you kind of get a different perspective on life, to say the least. Even now, as I tried to close my eyes and think of soft, comforting things, my face felt naked without the mask strapped on. My chest constricted with worry that my asthma, mysteriously gone, might suddenly return.

But before, I had a room, a bed (nebulizer or not), a place that I could at least call my own. People, family who knew who I was, where I was. In the end, I had a home.

And now? I was homeless. I didn't think it could get worse.
But of course, it did. Before, I had wished the apartment had reliable heating.

Now I just wanted a blanket or a pillow.

Funny how my priorities changed, again, just like that.

Hours passed, probably. I couldn't see it, due to the covered windows, but I could feel it. It was closer to morning now, had to be. And I still hadn't gotten a wink of sleep.

I laid on that floor for some time more until I couldn't take it anymore. A person could only stare at their freakish reflection that they didn't recognize for only so long before they started losing their minds.

I couldn't look at myself anymore.

Eventually, I pulled myself off the cold hardwood floor. There was a crick in my neck and my back ached. My stomach growled in complaint, and I remembered with irritating clarity that I had only had some bread and an apple to eat in the past twenty-four hours or so.

I hated feeling guilty over a stupid apple. I hated that I couldn't see eye-to-eye with the twins, who so far had been nothing but kind to me. They gave me food, shelter, and had asked for nothing in return. They smiled at me like we were old friends, even if the notion still felt disingenuous to me. Being upset over stealing also made me seem ungrateful, when that was the furthest from the truth. Were they upset with me? They hadn't seemed like it, at least not to the point of a grudge, but I couldn't be sure. There had to be a way I could fix this.

All I wanted to know was more about them, about myself, and how they knew me; but if it involved the Crucible, how good could those memories be?

Wiping my tired face against my sleeve, I shuffled out of the room and made my way back down to the theatre hall. The morning air left the entire place a little chilly, my breath puffing out in front of me. I rubbed my hands on the sides of my legs, wishing I had more than these white hospital slacks to wear. Even jeans would be better than this.

Wanda and Pietro were already up when I finally made it down to the theatre hall. I could hear the soft echoes of their voices, talking quietly, and spotted them lounging in the old velvet-covered seats — Wanda laid back with one of her scars as a pillow, playing with her necklaces; Pietro in the row behind her, draped over three seats, his feet propped up on her headrest before she knocked them off with her hand.

I stood by the stairwell, half-hidden behind the doorway, not entirely sure how to walk in and announce my entrance. I had hoped the two would be asleep because...I don't know, it'd be easier to sneak past them or something.

That was a strange thought. I even did a double-take at myself. Is that what I wanted? Did I want to escape? Was I afraid of Wanda and Pietro?

I blinked, frowned. I didn't fear the Maximoff twins, at least not in any physical way, not the way the Crucible's agents made me feel.

But should I be? Just how dangerous were these two? If the Crucible did this to me, then what did it do to them?

Suddenly, the voices stopped, and I jolted when I realized Wanda and Pietro had spotted me. When my eyes focused on them again, the twins had moved, straightening in their seats. My heart skipped a
beat; I felt like I'd just walked out onto a stage full of people, not two ratty kids who looked like me.

Wanda stood up, her fingers twisting together, her eyes nervous as she looked me up and down. She gave me a tight-lipped smile, like the kind a door-to-door salesman makes when meeting a hostile customer. "...Y-you are up! We, um, we were afraid to wake you, we did not want… never mind." Wanda shook her head before she could finish the thought. "Are you feeling better now?"

"I..." I felt awkward holding her gaze, so I adjusted to studying the floor, the multitude of chair legs. "I guess. I'm a little hungry."

That was a lie. I was famished.

"We still have some food left over from last night," Wanda said, pointing back to the stage, where they had left it. Only there was considerably less now, the floor covered in empty bags and wrappings. "Sorry, Pietro ate most of it, but we can get more if you like. I know you have not eaten much."

"No, no, it's fine." I muttered, finding my feet cemented to the spot. Wanda was starting to stare at me, and I had to physically pull myself away from the doorway, and it hurt because I just wanted to go back and hide again. I inhaled, filling my lungs and hoping it could suffice for the courage I didn't have. "Actually, uh, I just wanted to go outside for, uh, for a little bit."

"Good!" Pietro said, perking up at my words and holding out his hands. "We will go with you!"

"Um," I bit my lip, my eyes flicking back to the ground again. Again, their niceness was disconcerting me; especially after yesterday, I wondered if this was them trying to make it up to me, although I wasn't sure if there was really anything to be made up. I sidled around them, started making my way down the aisle. I hunched up my shoulders. "I'd rather go by myself."

"Oh," Pietro slumped in his seat, and even Wanda wilted a little.

"Be careful." Wanda said after a moment. Her hands tightened around her necklaces just at the name. I thought I saw a flash of red, like sparks, but figured it was the light reflecting off her jewelry. "Those agents, the Вулкан men, they still look for us."

Vulkan. Russian again. Was that what those agents were called? I wondered why. The word sent another shiver down my spine.

"I know," I said, stopping a second to look Wanda and Pietro in the eye. The concern in their faces seemed genuine, so I felt I should reassure them somehow. "I won't be gone long. Just need to clear my head, I guess."

They nodded but I could still sense the tension of their nervousness. I quickly turned my back on them, heading for the door before I could lose my gumption.

My shoulders were still all hunched up when I left the theatre and stepped out onto the cold streets. A soft breeze tossed leaves around my ankles, and I squinted up at the sky. It was as gray as yesterday, like some ever-present white ceiling above the city. The possibility of a storm seemed to loom all around, yet there was no sign of snowfall yet. There was the slightly stale scent of smoke in the air, something burning in the distance.

Not really sure what I was doing or where I was going, I picked a direction and began to walk. I still only wore that green jacket the nurse gave me, although I was now considering adding some layers because this definitely wasn't enough anymore. The fact I didn't get frostbite from being out in the wintry woods for an impossibly long time was a miracle.
There were stories of people succumbing to hypothermia, yet somehow surviving because their bodies went into hibernation. Is that what happened to me? I had survived with a considerable lack of frostbite or missing toes.

I'd never gotten hypothermia before; thinking about it only reminded me of all the times I'd been sick before. Pneumonia stuck out because I'd gotten it twice, once in each lung, when I was seven and later at nine; the exact event when I learned about my death date.

I wondered if it still applied. I studied my feet as I walked. Left, then right, out and back, just chugging along like it was no problem. I thought of how I ran yesterday, of the face in the mirror, and wondered how any of that could still be me. Even after the twins told me what happened, I still had a hard time wrapping my head around it. Was I, like, healthier now? If I could survive hypothermia with absolutely no ill-effects, if I could run so fast without getting an asthma attack, and suddenly know how to knock a man flat on his ass — did that mean I was better? Would I ever get sick again?

It was so much change, so quickly. I wondered if Mom would recognize me now. Or Peter. I barely could. Was anyone looking for me? I'd been gone for two years, surely someone would know I was gone. People had to be looking for me. The FBI had to be on this, that was their job, looking for kids. Did they have any idea where I actually was? Would they know this new me is the same sick little girl who just went missing, or something, back in September? I know the FBI had, like, face-aging software, but could it do this to my face?


Suffocating.

I shuddered, shaking the feeling from my head. What had that been? Tuberculosis? I always had problems with my lungs, and my weak immune system then would've made me a perfect recipient for any nasty airborne germs.

And it all happened so fast...no wonder Mom had no idea it wasn't just a fever or cold; I'd never had tuberculosis before. It must've ruptured something inside me. My knowledge of anatomy had my guesses at the pulmonary vessel. Mess with something like that and of course there's going to be a lot of blood involved. The fact I was still alive at all was truly something.

That led me to another thought. Had the people who kidnapped me...had the Crucible saved my life?

Was I wrong for thinking I'd be dead if not for them?

The idea sent chills down my back. Somehow, I got the feeling I wasn't saved out of the goodness of their hearts. No, there had to be something greater involved. The Crucible must have had a plan for me. Maybe they still did. Maybe that's why they were trying to get me back.

I shuddered again. Hopefully, that wouldn't happen.

Not really knowing where I was going, I continued walking for another ten minutes or so, stopping briefly to buy an apple from a vendor with what measly cash I still had left. It was really all I could afford. The idea of a budget with this little almost made me laugh, as I bit into the fruit and went on my way. I maybe had enough for laundry service, but not much else.

I found myself in a busier part of Novi Grad. The roads were wider and traffic became constant, especially as the day wore on. I passed by dozens of people on the sidewalk; despite my ragged clothes and surely gaunt appearance, no one gave me a second glance. Of course, no one gave
anyone a second glance, they were too busy keeping their eyes to the ground. It was rather chilling, but I tried to ignore it.

Ahead of me, across the street, was a long building made of beige stone, a bronze statue out in front of a man wielding a hammer and a book. But that wasn't what caught my eye. It was the fact that the front right corner of the building was completely missing, like it had just been blown away; loose rubble littered the ground around it, and a street sweeper pushed his brush half-heartedly against large chunks the size of his head.

I couldn't see inside the large hole due to the amount of scaffolding and temporary plywood walls, but I could make out black scorch marks against the edge of the damaged area. Like something had blown up.

That's when my eyes finally picked up on the building's signage. Библиотека.

Biblioteka. Library.

I blinked. An epiphany, blooming in my mind, like the sun emerging from behind dark clouds.

Dropping my arms, I headed inside.

The library was as dismal on the inside as it was on the outside. Dim lighting and dusty air greeted me as I entered, along with the smells of construction — the starchy plaster and drywall, the vaguely metallic scent of exposed piping and wires. To the right, where part of the wall was missing, was a green tarp, which didn't do much to keep the cold out, but at least it was dry.

It also hid most of the construction work — quiet as any library should be, I wondered when the workers came in. At night? I didn't see any lamps or floodlights that would be a part of that — nor did I see any tools or supplies. It seemed as though the workers had just forgotten to finish their job.

This place might have once been grand, like the theatre hall. The ceilings were high, with marble columns, now cracked and pocked with man-made damage. My footsteps echoed off the floors,

In front of me was the check-out desk, manned by a single female librarian who looked so old she'd probably seen the rise and fall of the Roman Empire. I approached the desk with some hesitance, glancing around. There didn't seem to be anyone else but us here, and the computer the librarian was typing on looked near ready to fall apart. Nothing in here seemed new or up to date.

"H-hello?" I said, my voice rising precariously. The old woman, dressed in a thick black coat with a scarf around her head, didn't look up at me, continuing to work on her computer. I bit my lip, wondering if she even heard me, then clearing my throat, speaking louder this time. "Um, hello? Excuse me?"

"Huh, what?" The librarian snapped, her head jerking back to look up at me. She squinted, pushed her glasses further up her nose. "Who are you? What do you want? Speak up, girl!"

"I-I..." Caught off-guard by her sharp demands, I stuttered over my words. "I was wondering if you have any comp —"

"You better not be here to vandalize!" The librarian interrupted.

"I — what?" I did a double-take.

"Vandalizing the library! You kids with your paint cans and dirty clothes!" The woman snapped, gesturing with a flippant hand. "Ruining Sokovian monuments! I see your type around here all the
time, thinking you can take advantage of a little old woman like me. Well, lemme tell you something, I was there when the first bombs dropped, and I didn't hesitate to pick up a gun when those jackboots started marching in. They wouldn't take this city without a fight, no siree —"

"Whoa, whoa, stop!" I threw up my hands, taking a step back before the woman could continue ranting. "I'm not here to tag your walls! I just wanted to use a computer!"

"Really?" The woman sat back in her chair with a huff, somewhat deflated. She still looked a suspicious. "Oh. They're in the back. Usually there's a time limit, but no one really comes here anymore. Not since those government agents shut down public access to the Internet…"

She pointed down one aisle, and I thanked her quickly before scurrying away. A part of me was still worried the librarian would break out into another rant; the other part of me was wondering how I could accomplish my plan without an Internet connection. Why would the Sokovian government shutdown the Internet? There would probably be riots if something like that happened in America. You couldn't just take away the Internet without considering repercussions. What were they afraid of?

Unfortunately, the politics behind this problem wasn't my main concern. I found the computer hub against the back wall of the library — there were maybe ten terminals in all, old school Macintosh with early 90's operating systems. Surprisingly, I was reassured by this. Old school coding was my thing, thanks to Peter's computer, and I had a pretty good understanding of how it worked. It also helped that coding was a lot simpler back then, and I knew my way around routing numbers and ISPs thanks to school. It took longer because I needed extra time to read, but my results were no less superior.

Choosing a computer at random, I made quick surveillance of what programs it had to offer. Luckily, I didn't have to log into anything to access the basic desktop. It even had an Internet Explorer icon, a twist I didn't expect. Clicking on it revealed the homepage to Sokovia's main news website — a rudimentary design titled The Soviet Gazette.

Soviet? Sokovia was Communist? Huh.

I didn't put too much thought to it, because I didn't hang around on that website for long. My first destination was Google — which quickly proved to be censored. All I got was a 111 error, something I'd never seen before. I guess one of the benefits of living in America was having a free Internet, which was something I didn't really appreciate until now.

Well, guess I was going to have to stretch my coding legs for this one.

Cracking my knuckles, and not even considering how illegal this was, I went to work.

It took some digging around in the computer's OS system to find the input to the ISP. There was only one in Novi Grad, but that wouldn't be a problem. I could use the same satellite that connected me to it to access another, less Big Brother satellite. And just like the computers, the ISP was also a decade or two behind the times. I was in my element.

It took me about ten minutes to write the code to reroute my IP address, and somewhere in the middle I wondered what would happen if I got caught. I was sort of amazed at myself when it hit me: I was hacking. I'd never hacked before, not even at school. I never thought I was good enough, but I knew understood this process — maybe it was just hacking because it was more illegal in Sokovia.

Even more important, I wondered why doing something illegal wasn't bothering me like it should.
Maybe it was like my last time in New York, when I got home and Mom caught me and Peter sneaking out. I hadn't care then that I was in trouble; and I was a lot more afraid of Mom than anyone else in the world, at least at the time.

And after being attacked by agents of the Crucible? I guess my priorities got rearranged.

But I didn't want to be those kinds of hackers that hurt people. Black hat hackers, that doxxed people and stole identities, credit cards, compromised private companies, ruined innocent lives just for funzies. For one, hella jail time, and two, no conscience. I liked to consider I had a pretty active conscience.

I settled my nerves by considering myself a white hat hacker. Someone who tested security and instead of exposing it, just let the right guy know. I wasn't here to make a big deal out of anything. I just wanted my email.

At the end of my coding edit, I paused before typing in my old username. Miss_Chevious. I came up with that when I was eleven when they taught how to make an email account at school, and it still made me laugh today. Seeing it now made me smile; it was great to have a computer under my fingertips again.

Most hackers had a signature, part of their alias, something to be remembered by if and when their work was discovered. Sometimes they were complex, like large visual designs made with keyboard symbols, or a phrase like 'fun kitty meow meow' or something else irreverent and stupid. Miss_Chevious might as well be mine, since it was the signature I used on all of my coding work, at least until I became legit or something. It was simple and easy to remember, and I was not in the mood (nor did I have the time) to get all fancy and arrogant leaving behind a better one.

Besides, it wasn't like I planned on making a habit of this. Why put in that extra effort? I'd just be a blip on the hacking radar, a nobody that got swallowed up in bigger groups like the Rising Tide, which may or may not be behind government leaks from last year. I finished the command, and hit enter.

Then I waited.

The cursor spun for a full minute as the browser went through the process.

Ding.

I was in.

A grin drew across my face as the Google search page finally appeared on my screen. When was the last time Sokovia had free internet access?

I wasn't dumb enough to use my own Google account to get email access. I had to start over with a new one, which admittedly didn't take very long, but I wondered how long it would take for whoever was in charge of Novi Grad's ISP realized they'd been hacked. I gained anonymity with choosing a public computer, but that didn't mean it couldn't be shut down remotely.

And it wasn't like I was good enough to cover my tracks. I had no idea how hackers didn't get caught. I just knew how to code, and I hoped applying it here didn't turn me into a well-meaning-but-still-guilty criminal or something.

Besides, leaving behind that signature meant that a part of me wanted to get caught. Just a little bit.

Deciding I'd have to compensate with a really short message, I finally opened up a new email draft.
There was no time for me to change the keyboard mapping to English, but I kept the message as simple and easy to understand as possible, while also keeping it coded in case anyone else happened to be reading Peter's emails like they were screening his calls. The message read:

*I am alive.*

*Novi Grad.*

— Goose

I smashed out the first email address I could think of — Peter's, of course — before hitting send. I didn't start breathing again until I got the 'message sent' notification.

It was only then did I realize I just typed the entire email in Sokovian.

"Dammit!" I slammed my palm against the table, before dropping my head on it. I didn't even realize I'd been thinking in a different language, and it didn't register to me at all as I read it on the screen. Would Peter be able to understand? Would he translate the Cyrillic, or would he think it's just weird spam email?

I hoped for the latter, but I didn't want to risk it. Time spent wasted on a wrongly-made message meant I was in danger longer. I opened up another draft, ready to start over, when I felt a hand on my shoulder.

"Amelia!"

Hearing my name and feeling the touch at once nearly had me jumping three feet into the air. I spun around in my seat, startled to find Pietro there, staring down at me with a fearful look in his eyes. My heart pounding, I hissed, "Jesus, you scared me! What're you doing here?"

"We came looking for you!" Pietro said, bending down so we could see eye-to-eye, planting his hands on his knees as he glanced towards the doors. "Wanda sensed the agents coming closer. They must have seen you earlier. We have to go before they find us again."

"Wait, *sensed*? What does that mean?" I made a face at the unusual phrasing. "Wait, how'd you even find me here?"

Pietro just shrugged, pulling at my arm, making me stand up. I barely had time to logout and close the browser before he was dragging me away, towards the exit. "Hey, slow down!"

"Wanda always knows where you are." Pietro said, not even looking at me as he pulled me outside. And there she was, the other twin waiting for us on the sidewalk. "We should go, there's too much space here..."

"What were you doing?" Wanda asked as we gathered outside the library. Pietro finally let go of my arm and I rolled my shoulders.

"I was just sending a message to a friend," I said, rubbing my arm and throwing a disgruntled look at Pietro, who had the grace to look chagrined. "I didn't know you two were so high-strung. What's the big deal?"

"Sending a message?" Wanda tilted her head, surprised. It was like she didn't even hear the last part. "How?"
"Uh. On the computer. With the Internet."

The twins gave me identical expressions of confusion. I winced inwardly, adding, "You know, email?"

"What is email?" Pietro asked, which confirmed my worst fear.

"You're not serious."

"We know what a computer is," Wanda said, looking a little annoyed at my tone of voice. She crossed her arms, screwing up her lips. "There were plenty in the Crucible. The doctors used them all the time. We just were not allowed to touch. We were not allowed near them at all. Not even you, at least not at first. That was part of how we escaped, from what you told us. You knew how the computers worked."

"I did?" This was news to me. I remembered I still had no idea how we got out of the Crucible, or what kind of challenge I had been up against. If the electronic security had been anything like I'd seen so far in Novi Grad, it wasn't that surprising to think I would've found a way around it. "Well, I guess that makes sense."

"What was your message about?" Pietro asked.

"It was to my cousin. I couldn't call him earlier," I said, earning a look of surprise from Wanda. "There were...phone problems."

"You did not tell me that," she said, and her frown appeared hurt. "Why did you not say anything? We could have helped."

"I…" I made a face, rocked back on my heels and looked away. "I guess I was scared. And maybe a little frustrated with you two. The argument and all. It was stupid. But this was the only way I knew how to solve the problem. And it worked, at least I think so. I don't think Peter can read Sokovian, though."

"Peter?" Wanda and Pietro said at the same time. Wanda pointed at her brother, "Not this one?"

I smiled a little, shaking my head. "No, no, my cousin Peter. It's like the same name, I know. One of you is hard enough to deal with —" I got a proud grin from Pietro for that — "Peter's practically my best friend. He's the only one I trust at home right now. I couldn't reach my mom, so… I told him I was here, in Sokovia. That I was still alive. I'm sure they're still looking for me at home. I hope they don't think I'm dead."

"Hmm," Wanda pursed her lips, glancing at Pietro before back at me. She held out her hand and took mine, squeezing reassuringly. "They will not give up on you, Amelia. You have good family at home, yes? If they are anything like me and Pietro, they will not stop looking until they find you."

I felt that spark again, against her skin. Not like the weird romantic spark you read about in books, but a literal spark of light, electricity. It was so bizarre, and the fact that it happened again made me think I wasn't just imagining it anymore. There was something seriously weird about these two, even if I couldn't figure out what it was.

For now, I was okay with that. "Thanks, Wanda. It means a lot."

"This is very sweet and gross and all," Pietro interrupted, holding up his hands. That seemed to be his go-to gesture to get our attention. "But I think we should go back now. Also, I am hungry."
Wanda rolled her eyes. "You are always hungry, Pietro."

"So what?" Pietro just shrugged helplessly, although there was an impish smile on his face as he started to lead the way back. We stepped out onto the road, waiting for a few cars to pass before crossing. "I need it! I am not fast without food."

"No one is fast without food," I said, but didn't put too much stock into those words. There was a strange lightness in my chest; I knew that the argument from last time wasn't quite over, and that there was still trouble out there — but I couldn't deny there wasn't some small joy in walking together, not alone, having someone to talk to, even if you didn't know them very well.

I took some solace in this. We were walking for maybe ten minutes, and I guess the library was farther from the theatre than I thought, because I had no idea where we were. But the twins seemed to know where they were going, and I trusted them to lead us.

So far, the way seemed clear, and the twins relaxed enough to even agree to get some food first. I wasn't as excited because, you know, that meant stealing, but at this point I didn't think I could convince them otherwise.

Luckily (or perhaps not so luckily), there was a bakery nearby, maybe a quarter mile down. We were in a mostly residential district, with businesses on the street level of buildings. Not wanting to take part in the whole stealing bit, I hung out two doors away from the bakery, back against the wall with my arms crossed. Technically, I was "keeping watch" but right now I was pretending I wasn't totally letting them get away with this.

Ugh. It bothered me, but not as much as before. Maybe I was just getting desensitized or something — as stupid as that sounds, but I was getting annoyed with myself for spending so much time thinking and worrying about it. I decided, then and there as I was watching the street, that stealing would be a necessary evil for us. We stole because we had to, not because we wanted to.

There was also the fact that, you know I had worst problems to deal with. And I was also hungry. Serious, stomach-pinching hungry.

This didn't make me happy, but at least I was satisfied knowing this stealing wasn't done out of greed.

So, I stood there. And I waited.

In actuality, the twins weren't gone very long. As Pietro boasted earlier, he was indeed fast, and the only thing I really had to entertain myself with was watching the pedestrians across the street. There were a few kids out playing, their laughter carrying over the general din of everyday traffic, passing a red ball between them, kicking it back and forth.

For the first time today, I spotted not one, but two of those roof guards, only now they were on the street. They looked all official, with uniforms and badges all out and ready to see. I kept an eye on them; the guards hadn't noticed me, but for some reason they had their guns out.

My attention was diverted by a tap on the shoulder. I turned my head, jumping a little at the twins suddenly standing right next to me. It was like they appeared out of thin air. "Whoa, hey, you're back."

"They did not even see us," Wanda said with a smug look. She had a threadbare messenger bag slung over her shoulder, and she reached in it, pulling out two muffins, handing them both to me. Having settled my inner qualms, I took both without hesitance. Wanda raised a skeptical eyebrow,
apparently gauging my reaction, and said, "We have more, but eat this for now."

I glanced back at the soldiers I saw earlier, still on alert; I just spotted the last one entering one of the apartment buildings, before vanishing from sight. I relaxed a little, just before I turned back to the twins again.

"We should get more before we go back," Pietro said, who was already finishing his own pastry. There was fine dusting of sugar around his lips, a second mustache. "This will only last a day."

"Don't go back to the bakery," I said right away, taking a bite into my muffin. "They'll know you're up to something if they see you again and you didn't buy anything."

The twins gave me startled looks. Around my mouthful, I asked, "What? I don't want you to get caught."

"Huh." Pietro remarked, raising an eyebrow in the same manner as his sister, but there was a smirk on his face that said he approved of my advice. He nudged Wanda with his elbow. "Well, you have funny way of thinking, Amelia. But I remember seeing small market a few blocks back…"

I didn't hear the rest of what Pietro said because my ears picked up on a commotion to my right. I glanced over to see that the soldiers coming out of the building again, this time with someone in tow; a young man, with his arms over his head. They were shouting aplenty, catching looks as the man argued, perhaps for his innocence.

The disturbance had the rest of the pedestrians shying away. The kids kept their heads bowed — other pedestrians made wide berths around them, some even crossing the street, all averting their eyes like there wasn't a soldier trying to bully some random people.

"What's going on?" I asked, interrupting Pietro while I was still looking at the scene. When they didn't answer right away, I swiveled my head to frown at them. "Are they arresting him?"

The looks on their faces was grim, all humor disappearing in a moment. They stepped a little closer to me so we were huddled together, and Wanda spoke in a hush, as though she was afraid of being overheard. "The Cheka hold random raids, looking for foreign spies."

"The Cheka?" I repeated, bewildered. We watched the scene unfold before us; a man and a woman came out after the guards, their arms raised in supplication, begging and pleading. Even from here, I could see tears.

"The secret police, the ВЧК," Pietro whispered against the back of my head. I could feel how tense he was behind me, like he was ready to run at any moment. "A Chekist works for the Республика. We have to go, before they try to arrest us, too."

"Arrest us? We're not doing anything wrong!" I said, deciding to ignore the irony of the stolen food in our hands. Cheka, Respublika, the new words swirled in my head, unfamiliar. Not that anyone could tell, which was the point. We're just witnesses, what was wrong with that?

We weren't doing anything. For that matter, neither was anyone else. Everyone else on the street seemed to be on Pietro's line of thinking, quickly clearing the area. It was just like in the square yesterday, with Wanda and those agents. It was like the citizens had a nose for trouble, and instead of gathering and ogling the scene like a New Yorker would, they turned their heads and darted out of sight without a word, pretending as if nothing was wrong.

There was just something not right here, and I had to mentally scramble to keep up with both this new information as well as what I was watching.
One of the Chekists had just forced the man to his knees, right in the middle of the street, his hands still up; at the same time, the elderly parents were tugging at the sleeves of the second soldier, who just shoved them away.

The soldier aimed his gun at the man's head, shouting, "Hands on your head! Hands on your head, American scum!"

"I'm not American!" The man protested, reluctantly complying while trying to turn his head, to watch even at the threat of the gun. "You're making a mistake! Please, don't hurt them!"

"Shouldn't we do something?" The words were out of my mouth before I could even figure out what it meant.

"What? No!" Wanda hissed, her hand wrapping around my wrist, trying to pull me back. "We have to go now. This is not good. We should not be watching."

"But they need help —"

"Touch me again and I'll put a bullet in your head!" The second soldier snapped, the muzzle of his gun mere inches from the old man's scalp. The man was on his knees, hands raised up to protect his head, while his wife clutched at his back, trying to act as a shield. "Are you a spy, too? How many are you?"

Wanda tugged at my arm when my feet remained planted to the spot. "Amelia, we need to go. You do not want to cross the Chekists —"

"Not a spy!" The wife cried. "Please, they are not spying! We're innocent! You've got the wrong man!"

"Shut up!"

"The Cheka do not like witnesses," Pietro interjected urgently, taking my other arm. But my gaze was focused only on the civilians, the family, looks of utter terror on their faces. And everyone else just turned their eyes away.

Why isn't anyone doing anything?

"This happens all the time. The Cheka are always finding dissenters, people who step out of line," Pietro continued, his voice echoing in the back of my mind. "Trust us, it is better if we leave while —"

That's when the second Chekist raised the butt of his rifle and struck the old man across the face. He went down, as his wife cried out.

The son tried to stand up at the sight of the abuse, only for the first Chekist to kick him in the back, sending the man face-first into the ground.

"Hey!" I didn't even realize it was me who was shouting until I was suddenly half-way across the road — I'd shaken off the twins so easily it was like their grips were made of paper.

I didn't even hear their cries of protest, although that may be because everyone else was yelling so loud that I couldn't even understand what was happening anymore.

"Hey!" I shouted again, gaining the second Chekist's attention as I drew near — the son was already being handcuffed and dragged away, struggling all the while; but it was the bleeding old man I was
really worried about. I had my hands up, trying to get between the gunman and the elderly couple. "Hey, leave them alone!"

"What?" The Chekist snapped, turning on me with a look of surprise and anger. He gave me a furious scowl, raising his gun a few inches, but it remained trained on the old man. "Get out of here! This is none of your business, stupid girl!"

"No!"

This is nuts. In the back of my mind, I couldn't believe I had just walked up to an angry man with clear lack of moral values holding a gun, acting like I had any reason to be doing that.

But the anger I felt blinded me to the fear I should be experiencing. And I wasn't just angry at the Cheka, I was furious that all the other bystanders were just minding their own business. How can you just ignore something like this?

I couldn't focus on all of that in this moment. I just wanted to stop this. "Please, put your gun away! They mean no harm! Look at them, they're just old people! How could they hurt you?"

"We found contraband materials on their property," the Chekist snapped, shoving my back with one hand. "If they were true Soviets, they wouldn't read foreign materials!"

"It was just a magazine!" The old woman protested. "Our son got it from the post office! It means nothing!"

"Please, our son is innocent," the old man begged, literally on his hands and knees. Blood seeped over his eye from the cut on his head, but he made no move to clear it away, too scared to move.

"I said, shut up!" The Chekist snarled, raising a hand in, ready to strike the woman. But he never got the chance.

Because before the blow could hand, I grabbed his wrist.

"Just let them go!" I didn't know what possessed me to do that. I suppose I should've expected the consequences.

"Don't touch me!" The Chekist ripped his arm away, turning on me completely now. My heart skipped a beat when the black muzzle finally directed itself at me. "Back off, now! Or I'll have you arrested for assaulting a government agent! You are interfering with official business of the Respublika!"

"What? I didn't assault you —"

"I said back off —"

"Amelia!" Wanda suddenly at my side again — it seemed to have taken her forever to reach me. In reality, less than a full minute had passed since this all started. She demanded, "What are you doing —"

"Get away, now!" The Chekist had both hands on his gun now, raised it to his face so I was now in his line of sight.

I stumbled back, alarmed. Wanda, the old couple, the Chekists, everyone was shouting at once. I didn't know where to look. My hands were up, but it meant nothing.
Maybe I was saying something, too. But I couldn't even hear my own voice.

The couple wasn't in front of me anymore. In the blur of the moment, I realized they had somehow gotten behind me, cowering against my back.

It was then I realized, no, they weren't behind me. I stepped in front of them.

The Chekist ordered something I didn't catch. I was too busy trying to find the twins. Wanda stood behind the couple, her hands wringing, expression panicked.

I couldn't tell if she was crying out to me or to the man with the gun at my chest.

Pietro was nowhere to be seen.

"Step away now!" The Chekist yelled. He tried to move around me, but I was light on my feet. I remained between him and his target.

"Leave them alone!" It was a simple refusal. I would not let him touch the couple.

I both knew the risk, and didn't understand it at all.

I could see it in his eyes. The fire, the rage. The tensing of his shoulders, the snarl in his face. How his finger twitched over the trigger.

"I said, now!"

"Go!" I said to Wanda, to the couple. "Just go!"

Behind them, the son was shouting.

"I can't!" Wanda said, shaking her head frantically. Her eyes flashed. Desperate. Afraid. Bright.

"This is your last chance!" The soldier said at the same time.

She wouldn't leave me. Why? It wasn't safe.

There wasn't enough time to convince her.

My eyes flicked between them. Just a split second. I didn't know where to focus. Should I stand my ground or run?

The Chekist's mouth moved, a final demand.

Stay?

But I heard nothing. My ears rung.

Run?

The gun jerked to my head.

Stay?

I flinched. Arms up.

Or run?
I didn't get the chance to decide.

He pulled the trigger.

"No!"
February 13th, 2011

Valentine's Day had always been a little lame, in Peter's opinion. The movies were always cheesy and it seemed less about love and more about diamond commercials; the only good thing was the candy, really, and the potential future in which he'd tell Liz Allen he loved her.

This time, however, was the first he spent waiting till midnight to see.

He sat in the darkness of his room, cross-legged on his bed, staring down at where his phone was. Peter couldn't actually see the phone; every few minutes he'd turn it on to check the time.

11:39 PM. Twenty minutes.

The wind whistled against his window, rattling gently. Outside, a black snowstorm raged. Peter had a blanket over his head and shoulders, like a hermit. Although it was below freezing outside, he was nice and cozy in here. In the room opposite, Aunt May and Uncle Ben slept.

They'd be angry if they saw that Peter was up at this hour. It was a school night. He had a big science test tomorrow. He should be sleeping, not staring at his phone.

But Peter couldn't sleep. He hadn't had a good night's rest since September.

And besides, he felt it was his duty to stay up tonight. At least until Midnight. He had to.

11:45. Almost there.


It was over so quick. Peter didn't even know she had tuberculosis until afterwards, when the doctor approached them — Peter, Aunt May, Uncle Ben, Aunt Hedy — in the hospital. How he explained there was nothing they could do, that Mia was already gone.

She never stood a chance.

Since then, Peter's had his first Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas, and New Year's without her. And now, Valentine's Day. It wasn't either of their favorite holiday, but at least they were always memorable. They always managed to make it fun somehow. Mia had always hated the day more
than him, so Peter had always made it his job to make her hate it a little less, each year.

Now...now Peter dreaded the day. He could almost understand the vitriol Amelia had for it now. The utter loathing. How she pretended it wasn't a day at all.

He wished he could do that. But Peter knew he wouldn't be able to. Not when he saw all the heart and cupid decorations, the giggles between students, the passing of cards and chocolate. Some obnoxious couple sending roses to each other because they're just that in love. Peter wondered who'd be lucky enough to get one from Flash this year.

It wasn't that Flash actually loved anyone. It was just Flash showing off his dad's spending money.

Nevertheless, it was effective.

Peter vaguely wondered if Liz had any valentines this year. He had been tempted to send her a card but thought the better of it. All he could hear in his head was Mia's laugh at his complete lack of self-awareness, the total surrender to the puppy-dog love that had him so enraptured with a girl out of his league.

Okay, so he was a little embarrassed. Maybe Mia wouldn't actually laugh at him. But Peter hoped next year he'd have the guts to do it.


His hands fiddled with the zippo lighter he'd borrowed from a kitchen drawer. Aunt May didn't know he had this. Both her and Uncle Ben would be pissed even more if they knew he'd been playing with it in his room — his bed, even. Peter could already imagine the lecture on fire hazards and responsibility.

He restrained the urge to light it up. Not yet. Not yet.

Foot twitching with growing anxiety, Peter distracted himself. Turned on his phone, opened up the photo album he had saved. Pictures of Mia. All of them. All the ones he could find, either here or at Hedy's, or with Ned, Michelle, anyone who had something of hers.

There were over a hundred. Peter scrolled through them, pausing on each one for at least a second or two, absorbing the different expressions, the different laughs Mia had at any given moment. Some of them were candid; those were the best. Mia wasn't usually glaring in them. Smiling or laughing, or concentrated on her work. Eating food or unwrapping presents.

His thumb flicked against the zippo lid. Open, shut, open, shut. It was so dark. A part of it just didn't seem real. Like if Peter called her right now, Mia would be there. She'd pick up.

But she wasn't. She wouldn't.

11:59 PM.

Midnight.

Peter lifted the zippo in front of his face. He flicked the flintwheel; nothing happened. Peter scowled and struggled with it for a moment, running his thumb sore as he tried to light the flint. Come on, dammit, he wasn't risking a second grounding just for this stupid plan not to wo—

Whish! A tiny flame lit his room in a faint, flickering orange glow. Peter blinked, startling himself, before smiling a little.
God, he was so lame. Mia was right about him.

It never bothered him. As long as she had been there to remind him, Peter could be as lame as he wanted and not give a damn.

Peter studied the flame. Thought of the bunsen burner fire that, had Mia not put it out in time, would’ve gotten him expelled.

It hurt to think about her. It hurt to sleep. It hurt even more now, and Peter wasn't sure if it was ever going to end. The sudden realization of it was like a slap in the face. His body hurt with a new pain, unimaginable, an ache that made every heartbeat pound in stabbing pangs.

He checked the phone again. 12:02 AM. February 14th. Valentine's Day.

"Happy Birthday, Mia." He whispered, voice hoarse, and blew out the flame.

October 28th, 2012

Two years since Mia's last birthday, two years since her funeral, Peter received a phone call.

This in itself was not unusual. Peter had received plenty of phone calls in his life, and kind of considered himself an expert on the matter. He'd certainly gotten better at them, ever since getting his new StarkPhone, but this was the first time he got a call from an unknown number.

His StarkPhone, a gift from the man himself, was top of the line, with an AI so intuitive it was practically human. Yes, it had an AI. Not fully voiced or personalized like JARVIS, but it could talk to him like the less-sarcastic-and-thus-inferior Siri. He decided not to name it since it clearly didn't have the same smarts as Mr. Stark's regular apparatus.

Peter was just walking out of Stark Tower — still in the process of rebuilding after the Battle — when his phone started buzzing in his pocket. He did a double-take at the unfamiliar number. "Who the heck…?"

See, this was unusual because StarkPhones were specifically designed to automatically block numbers like that — telemarketers, schemers, con-men and the like who would use a bizarre number from a country on the other side of the world.

Without thinking, he brought the glass to his ear. "Hello?"

In all honesty, Peter wasn't expecting much. He figured it was one of the aforementioned illegitimate pursuers of his money, but was surprised when he heard nothing at all. The silence stretched out as Peter waited for a sound, a reply, anything.

Instead, he heard nothing.
No, that was wrong. His ears, so sharp now, picked up on an almost untraceable noise.

Breathing.

Peter drew the phone back, frowning in puzzlement at the screen. Now this was really weird. He brought it back to his ear, asking again, "Hello? Is anyone there? Who is this?"

Click.

Okay, uh…what was that?

A new chill had found its way, crawling up Peter's back as he brought the phone down again. Pins and needles in his hands, the hairs rising on the back of his neck; the silent alarm of his Spider-Sense.

Something wasn't right about this. The breathing…it just, what was it? Something about the phone call, as entirely unremarkable it was to anyone else, had to mean something to Peter. He had learned fast after Ben's death that sometimes extraordinary things happened only too often to certain people, and he was definitely one of them. Knowing better than to ignore this, he spoke, "Hey, can you trace that number? I want to know where it's from."

"Right away, sir," the female voice said promptly (with the vague hints of an Irish accent; Peter wondered if Mr. Stark was using his phone as a prototype for a new software) as Peter started making his way down the street.

The day was overcast, the sun a glazed white orb hidden by clouds as they covered the city, and it rather matched his mood lately. It had been rainy lately, too much for October, another strange thing in Peter's life, although less menacing than the things he usually faced. It was already melting into puddles, draining into the streets and sewers below. His sneakers sloshed in a puddle he didn't see, and Peter jumped back, groaning as he shook his foot of the wet excess. Great, wet socks. This was gonna be a fun walk home.

Peter had just left Tony Stark's office after learning that Mr. Stark had left for the day, citing "personal issues" as his reasoning for suddenly ducking out of a city and a young hero who needed his guidance. Maybe it wasn't a big deal, but this was the third time so far, and Peter was starting to wonder just what the heck was going on with the guy. Not that he minded, oh no, if Mr. Stark needed some me-time, who was Peter to intervene?

But it was hard, being on his own sometimes. Mr. Stark was the only person Peter knew who had all the answers.

All thoughts of Tony Stark and Avengers-related business had suddenly been put aside by this new conundrum.

"The call appears to have originated from Sokovia," his phone answered as Peter finally recovered from the awful puddle incident and started walking again, heading towards the subway. He'd love to take the fast route home — his web-shooters were primed just for the occasion — but his ribs were bruised thanks to a carjacker's liberal use of a crowbar last night, and Peter wasn't interested in aggravating it further. It still made him wince as he hefted his backpack further on his shoulders.

"Sokovia?" Peter made a face. He hadn't heard of that name in a while. Not since his last history class, last year as a freshman. The first one without Mia. "As in that country that no one can get into?"

"The country of Sokovia has had closed borders for over ten years now, yes."
"Huh." Peter said, before sighing and descending the stairs into the metro station below. The rush of the subway blew his hair all out of whack, and he paused to flatten it out again. "Why would anyone in Sokovia call me? Seems like they have enough problems on their own."

"I do not know, sir. If it concerns you that much, I can alert Tony Stark of the matter."

"No, don't bother." Peter said, and to himself, admitted with some reluctance that perhaps this call meant nothing at all. The rate of odds and all that. One weird thing was bound to have no impact or significance to him at all, from time to time. Not everything was going to turn out like the bite of a genetically-altered spider did. "It's probably just a misdial."

He didn't know why he was so disappointed with this turn of events, and it wasn't until Peter took a seat in one of the subway cars did he really consider why he felt that way. Why was he unhappy that this one thing, this thing that just sent so many alarms off in his head, triggered his Spidey Sense, just turn out to be...nothing?

Peter spun the Starkphone in his hand. Maybe it was just a false alarm.

Maybe he'd been hoping for a miracle.

✮✮✮

October 29th, 2012.

Fifteen years old. He was fifteen years old.

Peter still grappled with the fact. August 10th of last year was the first time he realized he was finally older than Mia. It wasn't fair. It was the only thing she claimed superiority on. Mia loved being the oldest, even if it was only by half a year.

He shouldn't be older than her. Not by a year, not by two. This year's birthday had been even worse. He wondered if it would just be like that, all the time now. Birthdays were supposed to be fun, not a constant reminder of what he had lost.

Taking that title now just felt wrong. Like Peter had stolen it.

…Then again, Mia had cheated to begin with. Had she been born at the right time, he might've been older than her.

The thought made him smile ruefully. Currently, Peter was in Hell's Kitchen, armed with his camera, documenting the damage and reconstruction of Hell's Kitchen. He sat, feet swinging, on the edge of a roof five stories up. It was early evening, the sky just turning a warm orange. It was a cool, bright day, dead leaves piling up on the ground, with the fresh, earthy scent of petrichor in the air after a recent rainfall (and a lovely change from yesterday's weather).

Plenty of buildings had been destroyed, or at least greatly damaged to the point of being unsafe, but thanks to a mysterious philanthropist known only as Wilson Fisk, Hell's Kitchen was starting to look like its old self again. It might turn out to be a promising Halloween, considering the earlier dour
predictions.

...Well, except for those obnoxious neon signs, which Peter was now snapping shots of, standing in
the alleyway between a derelict gym and a laundromat.

Everything changed after the Battle of New York. Peter wondered what Mia might've thought about
it, of aliens dropping out of a massive hole in the sky, right over Manhattan.

She would've been right in the thick of it. Hell's Kitchen got hit the worst by the alien attack, after all,
but Peter was sure Mia could've survived it, if he reached her in time. He imagined the scenario, like
a cheesy action movie, only this time all your favorite characters didn't die.

Mia would've loved to kick some alien ass. He knew he did.

Peter had been a superhero for exactly five months, two weeks, and three days. He kept count mostly
because he still couldn't believe he was alive after being bitten by a genetically-altered spider back in
April. He discovered his powers shortly before the Incident, but it wasn't until after did he really start
to test them.

Mr. Stark was still trying to figure out how Peter wasn't dead. Usually if you're bitten by something
infinitely deadly and not-at-all natural, there was a good chance you didn't have long to live.

But just like Bruce Banner survived heinous amounts of gamma radiation poisoning and became the
Hulk, Peter Parker pulled through the infected bite and resulting gene-mixing to become...Spider-

Man. (Not Spider-Boy, or Spider-Monkey, or Underoos, as Mr. Stark liked to call him. It was Spider-Man.
Emphasis on the Man part).

But being a superhero felt like a whole lot of nothing if Peter couldn't even help the people he cared
about. Losing Mia had been bad enough — but then Uncle Ben, a year later, in a car hijack gone
wrong. And then there was the Battle of New York, a tragedy all on its own... Peter wondered how
all of this could happen in his life, all this horrid luck, and how none of it could be related. But the
fact was, it wasn't.

Like Mr. Stark said to him, "You just got dealt a bad hand, kid. That's life. Don't beat yourself up
about it."

Peter squinted through his viewfinder, took another picture. It came out lopsided. He sighed. He
wasn't sure if he was ever going to learn how to fully appreciate Tony Stark's advice. How else did
you deal with a bad hand in life? Just move on? Peter had too much weighing on his shoulders for
that.

He knew he was just torturing himself being Hell's Kitchen. But photography was the only way he
could relax. Besides, crime was pretty bad here, he could always nab a few crooks if he got bored.

Peter was here for the buildings, the architecture — destroyed and rebuilt. It was for the school
paper. A nice piece on the reconstruction of the city after the Incident. The healing wound, the hardy
spunk of Yankee spirit. A spirit nothing, not even megalomaniacal gods or space-conquering aliens,
could crush.

Although it hurt to be in Hell's Kitchen, Peter couldn't help but smile at the sight of civilians helping
clean-up; neighbors holding block-wide cook-outs; kids playing basketball in the open court. This
wasn't the best place to live, but nothing brought people together than shared loss.
A buzz in Peter's back pocket.

"One new email," his phone said, making Peter wince as he withdrew the phone from his pocket. He always forgot to remember to turn off the voice-over feature in public. "From an unknown contact."

Peter frowned as he opened the message on the phone. Unknown contact? More like unknown language.

To: Peter Parker Maverkicks6128
Subject: [No Subject]
From: Озорной 7999

я жив
Сокови ja
- Гусь

Sent: 2:10 PM (18 hours ago)

"Huh," Peter said, scanning the entire message a few times. Something about the username was oddly familiar, but he couldn't put his finger on it. There was one thing, though, that it probably wasn't a spam email. It looked like a legitimate message, and he doubted the possibility of someone sending this email to him by mistake. "What language is this? Do you know where it's from?"

"No, sorry, sir. The user used an IP anonymizer. However, the email appears to have been written in a Slavic dialect."

"Slavic?" Peter repeated, bewildered. That seemed odd. He didn't know anyone Slavic. "What does the username mean in English?"


"What?" Peter almost dropped his camera. His mind was still reeling from the answer. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," his phone said. "Is there a problem?"

"I-I don't…" Peter stammered, shaking his head. Mischievous? No, no, that can't be right. It has to be a coincidence. How was it that Mia's old username would come back to haunt Peter, after all this time? "What does the message say?"

"The message reads: I am alive. Sokovia. Signed, Goose."

"G-Goose?" Peter repeated, dumbfounded. No, it couldn't be a coincidence, there was no way. All of this, it meant something — even the number of the username, it was Mia's Oregon Trail high score (and one he couldn't beat). "Wait, did you say Sokovia? Again? Didn't I just get a call from there yesterday?"

"Yes, sir."

"But didn't you say that country had closed borders? I'm pretty sure I heard somewhere that they don't even have open Internet."
"That is correct, Mr. Parker, Sokovian Internet is heavily censored and monitored. But the odds of this happening are not unusually low. You are less likely to be eaten by shark. This email may just be a coincidence."

"Then how did this one get through?"

"I'm sorry, I don't know, sir. It appears to be a fluke, although someone who can craft an IP anonymizer may be capable of bypassing Sokovian censors. Tony Stark may be able to provide more information. Should I inform him of this email?"

"No!" Peter said a little too quickly, not that the phone could tell the difference. But he didn't care either way; he never talked about Mia specifically to Mr. Stark, and not only would it be weird bringing her up all of a sudden, but Peter didn't want Mr. Stark to think him distracted, either. Now there was the phone call. Peter wondered if it was connected, or if he was just being paranoid, seeing things that weren't there. That could certainly amount to some concern.

…but what would Mr. Stark say when presented with the evidence that Mia might still be alive, somehow?

No, no. Peter couldn't entertain the possibility. Mia was dead. She couldn't have written this email.

And yet... "This email account, how new is it?"

"Ozornoy-Seven-Nine-Nine was created six minutes before the message was sent."

Six minutes? A new account. If it was really Mia, why wouldn't she just use her regular email?

"Hey, what are you doing up here?" A voice shouted behind him, making Peter jump, dropping his phone.

It tumbled fifty feet down to the sidewalk below. Peter could only watch helplessly, before whirling around to face the irate landlord of the apartment building. The man had just stepped out, and was shaking a fist at him. "Get down from there, kid, before you hurt yourself!"

Deciding it best to leave before the man chose to press trespassing charges, Peter pulled himself down onto the roof, and the landlord practically dragged him by his ear down the stairs inside, before tossing him out the front doors.

It took Peter a minute to find his cellphone. It lied on the street, a starburst of broken plastic and shattered glass.

"Aw, man," Peter muttered, picking up what was left of the phone. The phone gave one last flicker of life before blinking out for the last time. Great. Why did he have to be such a butterfingers? Now he’d have to ask Mr. Stark for a new one, and Peter just knew he was going to ask questions. But it wasn't the situation that occurred Peter was worried about — it was the email, which Tony Stark would surely see…Then again, maybe he could be the only one to help.

Maybe with Tony Stark helping, Peter could get some answers on that weird email. Find out where it really came from, who made the account. If it was really Mia, back from the dead.

Still, as Peter started making his way down the street, looking for a new photo spot, doubt weighed him down. He wanted to believe Mia was alive, but was it worth it? Peter couldn't keep getting his hopes up just to have his entire soul crushed all over again. The email from months ago had hurt too much — in those spare moments between night and dawn, Peter had believed Mia was still out there. He couldn't handle going through that fall again.
No, Mia was dead. He had to let her memory rest.

Peter sighed to himself, stuffed his camera into his backpack, and started making his way down the alleyway.

...But who else would use Goose as a callsign?

Peter came to a stop upon coming out to the other side, onto another wide street. He glanced to his right, and saw the ice cream place where he had his last meal with Mia.

And that's when he knew. If their positions were switched, if it was Peter who died and Mia who got weird calls and emails, she'd look. She'd question everything. A closed-casket funeral wouldn't give her peace. It didn't give him peace.

Mia would find Peter. She'd find the answers. She'd know for sure.

So that was what Peter was going to do.

He was going to find the truth.
The gun fired.

Flash of the hammer. Smoke. The bullet spinning, jumping from the muzzle, straight for my heart.

But the bullet never reached me.

A gust of wind hit me from the right. My hair flew up into my face, just as a bolt of blue light flashed in front of me.


That's how long it took to open my eyes again, but I couldn't act any faster — because it still felt like I was moving at the same speed a normal.

It was the world slowing down.

A hand on my arm, wrapping around me. That was also moving at normal speed, but once again, my body refused to react accordingly. I could only catch a glimpse of white hair and a blue jacket.

I blinked again. Darkness.

Eyes open. I now stood in the middle of the street. The Chekist was twenty feet away, firing his gun into thin air. The bullet sailed slowly, almost peacefully into the air. A blue-silver streak weaved its way around him and towards me.

Another gust of wind.

Pietro at my side.

Finally, the world snapped back into motion. That's when the inertia and nausea really hit in and, unbalanced by my sudden relocation, I stumbled and nearly fell, dropping to one knee while the world spun around me. My stomach felt like it had just been yanked out of my body and put back upside down, and I started to dry heave a little, coughing and gagging.

I managed to right myself in time to see Wanda — now standing in front of me, before the Chekist — light up her hands with bright red energy, and sling it at the Chekist with the gun.

He barely had the time to let out a cry, never mind react to my sudden disappearance, before the two balls of pulsing energy slammed into chest and sent him flying back. His back broke the door behind him, and he disappeared into the darkness of the building behind him.

"Code Red, hostile civilians, we need reinforcements. I repeat, we need reinforce—" the second
Chekist grabbed his radio and started shouting at it, all the while staring in horror at Wanda and Pietro. One hand keeping the radio on, he didn't have time to pull up his gun before another gust of wind nearly knocked me over. In that split second, the Chekist was swiped by a streak that same, strange blue-silver energy — and the next second, the Chekist's holster was empty, leaving him grappling helplessly for his missing weapon.

The Chekist, knocked back, reeled as though he'd been struck, although I hadn't seen anything but that ghostly streak surrounding him, before disappearing once more in a wisp.

Pietro appeared beside me once again, a loud clatter at our feet. I looked down, shocked, to see the Chekist's gun now lying there. I stumbled back, startled, breath catching in my throat. So much action, so quickly. My mind could barely keep up.

The old man and woman gasped and stumbled back, as the son scrambled to his feet and ran to them. He hugged them, shielding them as Wanda turned her head, eyes burning rubies, as she brought up her left hand, fingers clawed. I could only watch, in shocked silence, as Pietro seemed to slip back into that stream of energy, one second here, the next over there, delivering a punch I didn't see until after it struck the Chekist and sent him flying back.

My head tilted back as I followed the Chekist's arc through the air, before he made his final landing on the hood of the car.

He didn't get back up.

I winced at the loud crunch of metal, partly impressed, but mostly horrified. It was as though he'd been hit with by a ballistic missile, not a teenage boy. I jumped when Pietro blinked back in front of me again, silver wisps trailing off his skin and dissipating like liquid smoke.

Wanda turned to me, the red light fading from her eyes, worry replacing that mask of anger. "Amelia? Amelia, are you okay?"

I didn't realize my mouth was hanging open until I tried to find my voice, only opening and closing helplessly. All thought had escaped me in that moment.

Then I finally found the right words. "Holy shit."

"We have to get leave," Pietro then said, at the same time I blurted, "What the hell was that?!

Both twins looked at me, alarmed. Wanda looked pale, while Pietro was flushed, panting slightly. His head kept switching around, scanning the street, eyes wide and alert. As if he hadn't heard me, he pointed to the family and said to Wanda, "Take care of them, I'll her get her out of here."

"No, wait, what's going on?" I jumped back with my hands raised to ward him off. Pietro reached out towards me and I jabbed a finger at him, my breath shaky — I still felt dizzy from…whatever he did to me. "Y-you can run — how can you run so fast?"

Pietro paused, held out his arms. There was a bewildered smile on his face, almost smug. "What? You did not see that coming?"

"I — no!" I exclaimed, throwing up my arms, completely taken aback by how casual these two seemed to be about this. I mean, they just…did that. What the hell?

"Pietro!" Wanda snapped just as Pietro opened his mouth to reply. "Stop fooling around! You are scaring her; you know she doesn't remember!"
"W-wait, so you're fast," I said, swaying slightly on my feet as I pointed from Pietro to Wanda. "And you have…magic?"

"No, no, is not so simple," Wanda grimaced, shaking her head and wringing her hands at me. Hands that launched a man through a door without ever having to touch him. "It is hard to explain but…we were, um, we were always like this."

"Always like that?" I said, bewildered. Was she saying what I thought she was saying? "That you're, what, you were born this way?"

Wanda and Pietro exchanged looks, before shrugging and turning back to me with synchronized nods. I just stared at them, gaping. No way. There was no way. "W-wait, people aren't just — they aren't just born with powers! I mean, that's what it is, isn't it? You don't have that unless you're a—"

I cut myself off as the word came to me, so startled by it that I forgot what I was saying. Pietro and Wanda leaned towards me, expecting me to finish that sentence, but before I could find the words to speak again, I was suddenly interrupted.

"What are you?" a new voice said, and we all turned out heads to look at the family, surprised to see they were still there. It was the old woman who spoke, her hand trembling as she pointed between the twins. Then, louder, angrier, she demanded, "What are you?!"

"Freaks!" the old man hissed, making the twins flinch, and the old couple dissolved into ravings of which the son could not soothe. He clutched them both to his chest, pale-faced as he glanced back at the ruined stoop, at the absolutely shattered door. He turned back to Wanda, swallowing at her narrowed gaze.

The man's voice was a little shaky as he said, "Go, all three of you. We promise, we won't tell anyone what happened here. And…” he paused, bit his lip, then met our eyes individually. "Thank you."

I blinked, surprised. I hadn't expected the gratitude, which sounded sincere by all accounts, but before I could say anything in return, a screech of tires interrupted me. We all spun around to stare as a brown Jeep came careening around the corner, engine roaring. On the side a red star was painted, along with the Sokovian crest. The men inside were dressed in brown uniforms, holding up their guns pointed to the sky as the jeep skidded to a stop at the street corner.

*Cheka*, at least half a dozen of them, not even waiting for solid ground before leaping out and charging straight for us. Any passerby left who had stayed to watch the first two *Chekists* get pounded were now running for their lives as the first few bullets shot past our shoulders.

"Oh no," the old woman wailed, hands flying to her face in despair. "More of them!"

As more bullets fired, everyone ran and ducked for cover. The family ran back inside the ruined stoop of their house, but were unable to go further as the wreckage had blocked any way in the house. Wanda ducked, pressing her back against the wall of the building. At the same time, I grabbed Pietro still standing next to me, and without thinking threw the both of us behind the cover of a car.

The act was instinct, this thoughtless motive to hide. Normally, my mind would've blanked and I would've just stood in front of their guns like a deer in headlights, but instead I was already thinking of possible exits. There was an alleyway near Wanda, and there could be a way through the apartment if we found a way to clear the fallen beams — not any way that would be fast enough for us, though.
As it was, I didn't have the time to come up with a new plan, as footsteps came thundering to a halt just outside my line of sight. Pietro, crouched next to me, looked ready to jump out and attack them, but I pressed a hand to his chest. Peeking out past the bumper of the car, I took stock of the Cheka coming to circle around the street, cutting off any other escape. They had their guns raised, these large assault rifles that just seemed like overkill now, but nonetheless intimidating as I found my options dwindling by the second.

"Surrender yourselves!" was the first warning called out to us, a Chekist standing in the middle with a fancier hat than the rest. The commanding officer, perhaps? "If you consider yourselves true Soviets, then surrender yourselves now, without a fight! We promise mercy upon those who are loyal to the State!"

Well, that wasn't going to happen, Soviet citizen or not. I glanced behind me, at the family trembling, white-faced, in the doorway. They looked ready to give themselves up right then and there; as opposed to Wanda and Pietro, who only appeared to get angrier at the officer's promise. Pietro even hissed, "Do not trust him, they do not wish our safety any more than they wish for any true citizen. They only want to protect the State."

"Thanks for the political commentary," I muttered under my breath, brow furrowing as I tried to parse through all of this. The twin's abilities, the Cheka, this weird Soviet thing going on that honestly was just as scary as everything else. "You think you can get us all out of here?"

"Only one at a time," Pietro said, rolling one shoulder and wincing. I wondered if he hurt himself, punching that Chekist so hard. I could see the new soldiers eyeing the Chekist on the roof of the nearby car with some wariness. Did they have any idea what they were dealing with? "They will attack before I have time to reach everyone."

I huffed, blowing hair out of my face, my heart sinking with frustration and dread. Great. How the hell were we going to get out of this one? Could we even fight these many guys? I couldn't see a way out of this that involved violence without getting hurt.

Needless to say, I was terrified of getting hurt. I didn't want to be reminded of what a bullet felt like going through my body.

"I will only say this one more time!" the Chekist officer called out. "Surrender yourselves now, or face the will of the State as fugitives of the law! You have ten seconds! Nine!"

My heart skipped a beat as he started counting down. I shifted forward on my knees, nearly getting up from my crouch in an attempt to move, to do something, before everyone here died. But Pietro's hand landed on my shoulder. "Amelia, no."

"No?" I hissed, snapping my head around to stare at him. "What else are we going to do? They've got guns, numbers. You said so yourself, we can't get out of here unscathed. Unless you got a better plan that you'd like to share, we don't have a lot of choice."

Pietro met my eyes, biting his lip as he wavered. He was panting, perhaps still out of breath, or maybe starting to panic. He threw a worried glance at Wanda, who looked as equally bereft and helpless. Then Pietro's shoulders drooped and he faced me again. "I-I do not know. I do not know what to do. But we cannot do this. Not Wanda. I will not let them take my sister. Not again."

"Four!"

And just like that, an idea seemed to have rooted itself in Pietro's mind. I saw it, saw his eyes lit up, his face turning grim with a sudden decision firmly made. He pressed his hands to the ground,
looked ready to rise. "I will go. Distract them. Keep Wanda safe for me."

"No!" Now it was me stopping him, grabbing the front of his shirt and yanking Pietro down before he could do something just as stupid. I realized Pietro was right in one regard: Freedom, family, at any cost. I had no idea what was going to happen next, but in that moment, I knew: "None of us are going."

"Two!"

"Then what?" Pietro hissed.

I paused, swallowing. "I —"

"One!" The officer called, and I knew it was too late.

Hunching up my shoulders, I winced, preparing for the onslaught when the Chekist declared, "You give us no choice, then. Men, open —"

"Halt!"

My mind, suddenly racing in what felt like the second before my death, came back to the present as a new voice rang through the air. Female, loud, and just as commanding as the Chekist officer. Startled, everyone looked around — Pietro and I peeking up from the car, to the side of the street opposite of the Cheka, in which a group of six black-clad men and women had just walked up from.

The same people who'd caught me and Wanda in the market.

The agents of the Crucible. The Vulkan.

I could barely believe it. They were here? They found us?

The woman who spoke was the same redhead I saw last time. Her face was unreadable as she stepped forward from her group to address the Chekist officer, who faced them with a bewildered and angry look. "Who goes there? This is official State business you are intruding upon! Leave now!"

"This business is ours," the redheaded woman replied, pulling something out of her pocket and presenting it to the officer. A badge, too far away to read. "I am Comrade Brandt, and we are the Komitet of the Chairman, and the three adolescents you've captured belong to us."

"The Komitet?" the officer snapped, scowling. The other Cheka exchanged looks of surprise; I guess the Komitet were as big a deal to them as they were to us. "This isn't your jurisdiction; unruly citizens belong in our custody. You wish to intervene? Then speak to our commander — Serov, who is the Chairman's right-hand man, as you should very well know."

"Oh, of course," Brandt replied, smiling, although she didn't look particularly pleased. She flicked a hand, and one of the men behind her pulled out a cell phone, started to call someone. "But I think it would be the best interest for both of us if you simply hand over the children. You can have the spy family, I don't care. But the children belong to the Chairman."

"No," the Chekist officer said matter-of-factly, which earned him several concerning looks. "The children have assaulted my men, and they will receive proper justice!"

"Are they…" I whispered as my attention flicked between the two parties, who seemed to have forgotten about us entirely. I couldn't believe what I was witnessing. "Are they arguing with each
"The Cheka and the Komitet have always been at each other's throats," Pietro whispered back, sounding slightly amused. "State police and federal agents never get along."

Offhand, I marveled at this bizarre turn of events. Cheka soldiers and Vulkan agents, both of our enemies, also against each other. A part of me found it hilarious, finding myself in a three-way stand-off. My luck was sure something, wasn't it?

I opened my mouth to reply, but a chorus of click-click-click made me turn my head back to the street, startled to discover that the Cheka had turned their guns on the Komitet — they, likewise, had done the same; I couldn't tell who'd drawn first, or catch what was said that provoked this sudden turn. But I was aware of how the air suddenly went quite still. I myself found myself frozen to the spot, my eyes darting between the two parties, wondering who would shoot first.

"My men will not hesitate to fire on state officials," Brandt said, her lips twitching in what I imagined might've been the ghost of a smile. Was she enjoying this? "Set your guns away before this gets any worse than it has to. Amelia knows what we're talking about, don't you?"

I jolted, startled when she said my name. I stared at her and found her eyes staring back. There was a smirk on her face, but she must've seen something in my own expression, maybe the fact that I didn't actually recognize her, because a line formed between her brow.

But who was she? What did the Komitet know about me? What did I have to do with them? My voice was frozen in my throat, so after a short silence stretched out, Brandt just went on, "Well, silent as ever, I see. At least you learned something."

Behind me, Pietro whispered, "Don't you remember?"

I didn't have the thought to even shake my head. My entire attention was focused solely on Brandt.

The officer looked bewildered at our little (non)interchange, before scowling and turning back to the redhead woman. "No. I will ask you to lay down your arms, madam. I am operating under the duty given to me by the Chairman, and I will cease from his word alone. You fire on us, and you will have committed a crime against the State!"

"Now you're just being difficult." Brandt snapped, her dark eyes narrowing. "Amelia, come here."

She didn't even look at me when she said that. If I wasn't surprised before, I was sure as hell surprised now. It didn't end when Brandt scowled. "That's an order, Soldatka."

She was ordering me now? Who the hell did she think she was?

My indignance was only dampened by the strange sensation in my chest, how I leaned forward — before stopping myself, wondering what the hell compelled me to even listen to Brandt.

Pietro, who must've noticed, placed a hand on my shoulder. "Amelia, are you okay? You have to ignore her. Don't let her control you."

"Don't worry about me," I licked my lips, but my tongue felt like sandpaper. Throwing him a quick glance, I jerked my chin, gesturing to the family still cowering in the doorway. "Get them out of here while they're still distracted with each other."

This was part of the plan, getting the innocent civilians away from here. Away, before a fight could break out and they got hurt again. Tensions were rising fast, like electricity climbing into the air, and
I had a feeling this wasn't going to end well for us. Not when Brandt acting the way she was, like she knew me, like I'd listen.

Like I wanted to listen.

Pietro looked reluctant, glancing behind him before giving me a quick nod and quietly slipping away. I kept an eye out for him, making sure no one noticed him, and felt the quick rush of wind as he darted off with the old woman.

One down.

"Lay down your arms!" the Chekist commanded again, starting to sound a little annoyed. I couldn't tell if he had any better idea of what Brandt was talking about, but I could see his men starting to share glances as this situation just got more and more interesting. I myself had no way of knowing which way this would go — I only hoped that I could get out of it alive, along with the others.

"You want to die today, Amelia?" Brandt called out, staring at the Chekist officer as if taunting him and not me. "If you don't stand with us in the next ten seconds, then I can't promise that your previous record will save you from punishment."

"You stand with her, girl," the Chekist officer countered, throwing me a side glance. "Then I will take it as an act of hostility and I will fire immediately!"

Wow, what a great set of options I had.

In Pietro's absence, Wanda slipped in next to me, her back pressed against the bumper. Under her breath, she said, "You have a plan? Is there a way out?"

I didn't want to tell her I only had, like, twelve percent of a plan. Instead, I gave her a shrug. "It's, um, a work in the process."

"Do you need me to do anything?"

Wanda looked expectant, ready to help, something that made me smile with gratitude. "Not yet, but thanks. I just need to keep them off Pietro until he gets that family out of here. Then we run like hell. If things get hairy, though, I might need your help in kicking their ass."

There wasn't much confidence in my words, though — the sight of the Komitet had rattled me, and I just couldn't shake the feeling that something awful was going to happen - beyond the promised hail of bullets, anyways. That I was missing some crucial detail here, but I didn't know what to do. I didn't really want to be tempting fate right now — again, my plan was only a shambling thing, hardly the kind historians might talk about. But nonetheless, Wanda grinned, and there was something particularly wicked about those red lips and sharp teeth. "It would be my pleasure."

Over her shoulder, Pietro appeared again, took the old man. Gone in a blink.

Two down.

"You'll have to choose eventually, Amelia," Brandt said, even as her men started to shift warily. Neither side put down their weapons. "You can't stay on the sidelines forever. When the Chairman finally calls on his Soldatka, you will be compelled to do your duty for the State and its people!"

"You do not speak for the State or any of its citizens," The officer retorted. "If I need the help of the Komitet, I will call for it. Leave now! I will not tolerate further insubordination."
Brandt's eyes narrowed dangerously at that.

"Amelia, we need to do something," Wanda urged, shaking my arm. "We have to go now, while they are distracted!"

But I couldn't move. How could I? With Brandt right there, knowing I was here, knowing what she knew and what I didn't. Her words rang in my ears like some strange echo of a memory, drawing me in, making my blood run cold.

My feet felt firmly planted to the ground and I didn't know why. Actually, yes, I did know. I knew exactly what it was.

Fear.

I was scared.

I didn't know what to do. And I couldn't admit it.

Wanda said something, but I missed it, distracted by a flash of silver.

"I am not your subordinate; I don't take orders —"

Pietro, taking the man's arm. The last one, gone.

"This is not a request —"

I looked to Wanda, only to find her gone.

"Do you think this is a game —"

I peer around the other side of the car, by the sidewalk. Wanda was already creeping up around behind the Cheka. In her right hand she played with a string of red light.

"I will not tolerate —"

I open my mouth to call her back, that whatever she was about to do wasn't what I wanted, but she was already too far away, and I was still frozen to the spot.

Wanda raised her hand. Pointed her finger at the closest Chekist soldier.

"I don't care, I'm getting them —"

The thread of red magic shot from her finger. It caught the soldier right in the temple. I watched, in morbid curiosity, frozen to the spot, as he stumbled, blinked, and his eyes turned bright red.

Then he brought up his rifle. Aimed right at Brandt.

I raised my hand, as if I could stop him.

BANG!

The bullet hit Brandt directly in the chest, and she fell, but I never saw her hitting the ground because it was that exact moment that he'll rained down on this little Sokovian street.

It was like the air exploded, gunfire sounding off from both ends. I watched in stunned horror as two more fell instantly, before the one of the Vulkan agents took three bullets to the chest, dropped to one
knee…

And picked himself up again.

"Amelia, get up!" Wanda called, just as the jeep started up again from way down the street.

We were still just out of sight of them as the Jeep came roaring past to cut off the other end of the street. At its approaching thunder, Wanda suddenly stood up, and before I could shout, she thrust out with her hands.

There was that same glowing red energy, swirling and chaotic, that had made the Chekist fire his gun, now launch an entire vehicle in the air. It came crashing down on its hood, crushing two men — the Chekist officer and a Vulkan agent. Fire broke out instantly, a second before the explosion.

I had just stood up, ready to bolt when the shockwave hit me full in the face. It sent me falling back, and I landed hard on my side, scraping up my right hand and forearm.

I picked up my head just in time to see the side of the burning Jeep tear itself apart.

Two hands, singed black and burning bright, peeling metal away like it was paper. Then out came the head of what was the agent, only his eyes were glowing as well. Not the red luster of Wanda's, but a yellow-white, truly malevolent blaze of light, as if his eyes had been replaced with embers.

The man, or whatever he was, stepped out of the wreckage, entire body on fire. But he didn't seem to be in pain. In fact, he was grinning, as he grabbed a Chekist soldier by the throat and lifted him up into the air.

The soldier screamed as what could only be described as a sizzling noise as his skin was burned. An acrid stench filled the air, and the flaming agent only laughed as the soldier struggled helplessly, continuing to burn.

Finally, his legs stopped kicking. The agent cast his body unceremoniously to the ground.

They were all like this. The Vulkan agents, burning bright, terrorizing the Cheka with wild, gleeful abandon. No matter how many bullets found their targets, the agents didn't slow down. They didn't die.

My heart felt like it had stopped. I couldn't move. I couldn't make sense of what I saw.

This wasn't supposed to happen. That was the only thought in my head. This wasn't part of the plan. In retrospect, I suppose I should've been clearer to Wanda what I meant by 'kick some ass'. At least the other half of the plan, Pietro saving the family, had worked out all right. Now I just had to deal with…well, this. The Vulkan, and their abilities, which I had not accounted for.

How could I? I didn't remember them.

Another flash of silver. Pietro, appearing out of nowhere, striking this agent right across the jaw. In that split second of contact, I saw the pain in Pietro's face as the agent's skin burned his fist, but he didn't pull back, didn't stop or stumble. He was gone once again as the agent reeled from the hit, falling back into the ruins of the Jeep.

Then a body landed right in front of the car I had hidden behind. I saw the burning hands first. Feminine arms, red hair. Then the head, picking itself up, flaring white eyes meeting mine. Brandt, grinning.
"Hello, Amelia," she said, her English startling me, so easy and clear. *American.* "How nice to see you again."

Then she snatched at me, a ball of fire in her hand.

Inches from my skin. I could feel the heat, then. So hot, not even touching me yet. Like a furnace, burning me.

I wanted to strike her hand away, but I'd seen what Pietro had done only a few seconds ago. What they were doing to the soldiers. If I touched her, it would only hurt me.

But I remembered my feet, my shoes, and prayed they'd provide enough protection as I slammed my heel into Brandt's face. There was a satisfying crunch as it connected with her nose — I guess there was still cartilage under all that ashen skin, because Brandt recoiled, grunting in pain. When she recovered, her nose was crooked.

And yet Brandt just laughed, pulling herself up to one knee. With her hand, she shoved her nose back into place. Wrinkling her nose, she cast me a saccharine smile. "Oh, you shouldn't have done that, sweetheart."

Her shoulders hunched, legs tensing. I saw the pounce before it came, and tried to scramble back on my hands. I was in a vulnerable position; I couldn't defend myself.

Not like this.

Not from them.

Brandt launched forward, arms outstretched. Going for my throat.

Pietro got there first.

I never saw him. My eyes were focused on Brandt's hands as they came down, inches from my skin. Her body so hot, the air rippled off in waves. It blew back my hair, and I could only bring up my arms, to protect my face.

A grip wrapped around my arm, tighter than a vice.

And then — whoosh.

The ground disappeared from underneath me, legs flying out. The world became a blur as my head snapped back. Not that I could look for very long, as the wind was beyond what my eyes could handle, and I had to squeeze my eyes shut and my life didn't come to an end splattered across a wall.

There was no stopping, I knew, no point in trying to break free; at this speed, where I couldn't even hear my own heartbeat, that if I let go right now, I would hit the ground so hard it'd break every bone in my body. Pietro had picked me up so fast that my joints cracked, and I didn't even feel it until I was back on my feet again, standing in the center of the theatre hall.

And just like that. It was all over.

The agents, gone. The fight, lost.

I stumbled, once again thrown off balance, collapsing against one of the chairs, and had to keel over before I puked. That's when the joint pain kicked in and my entire spine ached from whiplash. "Gah! Stop that!"
"Sorry!" Pietro said, giving me a helpless shrug before disappearing again, leaving a silver trail in his wake.

I was left in a daze. The world seemed a little fuzzy at the edges, and my hearing was muffled, the air gone suddenly still and quiet. My heart still beat too fast in my chest, sending too much blood to my head. My face was too hot; it was like I could still feel Brandt, inches away, ready to kill me.

She knew my name.

Like the others, she knew who I was. I mean, I had guessed earlier, but it wasn't a fact I appreciated until now.

This was all very, very real.

My mind apparently was taking its time to catch up, because I suddenly found myself incredibly fascinated by the wispy silhouette Pietro left in his wake. I raised my hand, drawing my fingers through it as the trace began disappearing. It felt like pins and needles, a tingling, electric almost — not unlike how Wanda's magic felt. I wondered, idly, if somehow their powers were similar in structure.

Then I realized what I was thinking. The twins. Their powers. Superpowers. Agents on fire. Who couldn't die.

A zip of air, like a balloon popped, and suddenly Wanda and Pietro were standing in front of me again. Pietro, carrying his sister, let her down gently; much unlike how he kind of just let go of me without stopping completely first. Hmph.

I stood up again, or tried to, leaning heavily on the back of one seat. I felt dizzy, sick — either from motion sickness or from what I just witnessed, I couldn't be sure. Maybe a combination of both. I looked at both of them, appraised their expressions; Pietro, jittery, looking wired for another sprint. Wanda, eyes ablaze, power still crackling at her fingertips. Something about those agents had really set them off, a deep-seated anger that I had yet to understand.

But I was going to.

Inhaling through my nose, I took a second to compose myself, closing my eyes. When I opened them again, I met their eyes and demanded one thing:

"What the fuck was that?"

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Brandt here, in case you don't recognize her, is from a certain Phase 2 movie ;)
Chapter Summary

Tensions in Sokovia are reaching a breaking point. After almost dying in a confrontation between Chekists and the Komitet, Wanda and Pietro need Amelia to become as the Crucible made her. But Mia is filled with doubt; How can she do what the twins ask of her? She has one choice to make: Adapt, or succumb to her own fear.

Chapter Notes

I hope Amelia’s character isn’t annoying you. I’m hoping for effective character development, in which she turns from the rather naïve and scared girl from the beginning of the story into a solid leader and capable superhero, with some ups and downs in her learning process, while also battling her personality flaws. Tell me how it goes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
In retrospect, that was a really bad way to open up a dialogue between us.

On the other hand, I was pretty worked up.

So, when Pietro asked, "What was what?" I might have overreacted.

"What was what?" I repeated, aghast. I didn't know what to make of anything that just happened. The fight between the Cheka and the Vulkan, the flying car, the burning soldiers…what the hell did I just witness? "Everything! Yours powers, the fight, the Komitet and whatever they are! And when I said kick their ass, throwing a car on top of them was not what I meant!"

"Well, you were not very clear," Wanda retorted, crossing her arms and scowling. "At least I did something."

"That's not —" I started, then realized she had a point and quickly changed tactics, diverting the topic. "That's not the point! The truck just fell on top of them — It exploded! And then one of them just walked out! God, we almost died! And those agents they just, they just killed —"

I couldn't finish the sentence, the sight of the Cheka soldiers, sorely outmatched, being mowed down by the Crucible agents. The grins they wore as they slaughtered everyone. I shuddered, chills going down my back.

"It is not our fault!" Pietro complained, throwing out his hands. "You were never this stupid before!"

"Pff — what?" I spluttered, taken aback. "B-before what? Before I lost my memory? Well, that says enough, doesn't it? I'm not who I was back then, in the Crucible, okay? Whoever you think I was, I'm not that person!"

"But we need you to be!" Pietro said, earnest, desperation in his eyes as he wrung his hands. "You keep hesitating. You are always afraid."

"Uh, who wouldn't be?"

"We are afraid, too," Wanda gave me a disapproving look. "But we do not let it control us. You have to remember to do the same. It is the only way you will survive."

"Survive?" I said, an incredulous laugh bursting from my lips. "This is insane!"

"Do you think the Vulkan are just playing games?" Pietro snapped, and I took a step back, cowed. He went on vehemently: "We are lucky that they still consider us useful, still want to capture and keep us. It will not be good if they do! They kill people, Amelia. And they will kill us, too, if given the order."

The truth was daunting, but I understood it nonetheless. They'll kill me. There are people in this world who actually want me dead. I had a sharp intake of breath at that, for a second not knowing how to respond.

What do you do when there were people actively trying to kill you?

Even if they weren't going to. Yet.

"N-no," I admitted, glancing away and feeling a little ashamed. I knew that, I knew to take this seriously, but a part of my mind was still resisting to the bizarre nature of it all. "I just don't understand! I don't even know what the Cheka are, never mind the Komitet! "
"The Vulkan, you see what they can do, you know why they are called that." Wanda replied with a reprimanding tone, folding her arms. Like Mom when she knew I knew better. "They work for the Komitet, a shadowy mask the Chairmen gives his forces, hiding their true origins of the Crucible. The place is a secret very few know about, but its reach goes far beyond the borders of Sokovia."

"And the Cheka? They are secret police," Pietro said, frowning. I had a feeling he may have told me this before but I couldn't remember the specifics. "A Chekist works for the Respublika. They've been in control ever since the New Years' Revolution."

"Wait, the Soviet Republic?" My mind translated the words instantly, and I had to mentally scramble to keep up with both this new information as well as what I was watching. I could only shake my head, wondering why none of this was gelling with what I already knew, from what they taught in class. "No, that can't be right, Sokovia hasn't been Communist in years, not since the UN intervened…"

"What are you talking about?" Wanda demanded, suddenly angry. The sudden change in tone had me giving her a brief, nervous look. Her expression was concerned (for my sanity?), her teeth bared as she snarled, "The UN fixed nothing! They sent bombs and then left! There was no one here to stop the Chairman from taking over!"

"But how could no one know? Why had we never heard of this back in America?" Surely, I would have known some of this, but it was all news to me. The Soviets haven't been in power even in Russia since the Nineties…

"How would we know?" Pietro gestured to himself, giving me a helpless shrug. I could hear the rising anxiety in his tone, how all this yelling and confusion was starting to get to him. I felt bad, but I was already too far down my own path to do anything about it. "Wanda and I, we were locked in the Crucible for almost ten years! Ten years! Do you know how long that is, waiting for someone to rescue you, the good guys, but it never happens?"

"Ten years, just waiting," Wanda said, and her look was sad resentment, of resignation. "And the world just left us behind, forgotten."

A short silence fell between us, and it occurred to me that this wasn't just about my earlier failure. No, these were the words that Wanda and Pietro had pent up for a long time coming, and were only now able to vent on someone, someone working from a completely different context from them. Someone easy to get angry at.

Not that I blamed them.

"We were there when the bombs fell," Pietro continued, his voice low, head bowed in what appeared to be contemplation, but there was a tremor in his voice — trying to hold himself back. "Stark weaponry. Advanced, yes? Kills you so fast you don't even have time to feel it."

"It took our parents," Wanda said. She was able to meet my eyes, but they were filled with tears, and her fists clenched at her side, starting to glow red. Too much emotion. Too much pain. "First our father, who abandoned us when trouble came too close, and never returned. Does he even know we are still alive? Would he even care?"

"Our mother died in our home," Pietro continued, wiping at his face, although all I could see had remained dry. He wrinkled his nose before smoothing his expression, when Wanda looked at him; I could appreciate the difficult, nearly painful act to appear strong, no matter what. Was he just embarrassed, like I would be, or did he want to hide it from Wanda? They exchanged one of those inscrutable looks twins always shared, and he opened up one arm to receive Wanda as she came in
for a hug, and held her as he continued to speak: "While our city was being torn apart, the roof of our house collapsed. Maybe it was just all the shaking. Maybe a bomb hit us. Either way. The entire building collapsed on top of us — Wanda and I were lucky. We hid under the bed. But Dai just — she just disappeared in a cloud of dust. We never saw her again."

"This is just what I have to remember them." Wanda plucked at her necklaces, holding two out. The Star of David, and a small silver locket. When I stepped closer, she opened the locket, allowing me to see the pictures inside.

Two faces in black-and-white, what looked to be from an old photo. A man and a woman — I saw the familial resemblance in the sharp eyes and pressed-lip smile, but the photos seemed too old to be of their parents. My confusion was done away when Wanda continued: "Dat gave me this, when I was little. It was all he had left of his parents. Now it is all I have left of him."

Her pain resonated deep with me, so sharp and unexpected that it took me by surprise. But of course, it meant something to me, too. Like her, I knew what it was like to feel abandoned. What it was like to not have a father. I guess I was lucky; I didn't have to go through the pain and loss of watching him leave.

But I couldn't say that. I didn't want to, and I doubted they would appreciate it. So, I didn't say anything, just stared at the old faces in the locket, having seared them in my mind.

Pietro continued, drawing my eyes up to his sad, but reserved expression. "We never got the chance to mourn them. It sounds silly, but when you are hiding under a bed for two days, many thoughts go through your mind. That was one of them."

"You were trapped for two days?" My words were little more than a breath, astonished, horrified. How old would they have been? Six, seven?

"Yes," Wanda muttered, her fingers closing around the locket, and it snapped shut. "All the while staring at a bomb that had fallen only inches away. It did not explode, but we were so afraid to move. Instead of thinking of our parents, we were terrified for our own lives, only able to think of the writing on the side of the bomb that had killed Dai. A name. Stark."

She said the name with such venom that I didn't bother clarifying if it was Tony Stark in particular she hated. It was clear enough as it was, and I doubted at this point she wouldn't know. If I asked, it'd only sound like I was making fun of her.

The ire in Wanda's voice appeared in Pietro's expression, as his brow drew together and he spoke derisively, "Everyone acts like his weapons can solve any problem. That is what the UN did, after all. Dropped the bombs and decided that was all they needed to do. Do not bother coming here, do not ask what happened to the people, to the innocent. Who cares if they die, so long as you can kill a few Soviet invaders?"

It was rather critical, and in the back of my mind, not entirely fair. I really didn't want to be a jerk, but my inner pedant couldn't help but point out: "But Stark doesn't make weapons anymore."

That earned me double looks of surprise. "What?" Wanda demanded, as if I'd made a bad joke.

"He doesn't make weapons," I repeated, then took a deep breath before explaining, "Not since 2008. When he was...when he was kidnapped? I guess you guys never heard about that."

"Who kidnapped him?" Pietro smirked, sounding far more amused than I would've liked. He never had any malice in the way he spoke, always had this cool air about him; unlike Wanda, who seemed
to carry this seething energy behind her expression at every turn.
"Terrorists. Some guys that call themselves the Ten Rings. But Tony Stark got out, got rid of them."

"Oh, let me guess," Wanda drawled, rolling her eyes. "He blew them up."

I stared at her, realizing my mistake only too late. Bringing this up hadn't helped at all. "Uh, yeah. I just made it worse, didn't I?"

"Did you think men could change?" Pietro asked, giving me a look like he almost pitied me for my naivete. It annoyed me a little, but mostly because they were right. "What is he now, then?"

"Uh. Iron Man." I winced, not wanting to say it, already knowing how it would sound to them.
"Flying metal suit he uses to fight."

And just as I expected, Wanda threw back her head and laughed. But it was cold. "Ha! See, Pietro? Stark can't help himself. He is just another warmonger looking for profit and glory."

"Like I said," Pietro shrugged. "Men do not change. Men like Stark, and men like the Chairman, are the reason the world is what it is. Why we are like this. Why Sokovia is like this. And why no one cares."

I just scowled. I knew I hadn't made a bit of difference. Actually, I was pretty sure I just made their hate stronger.

Everything I said just seemed like the wrong thing — all this deep-seated anger and pain and hatred. Toxic stuff I was plenty familiar with, but in case you couldn't already tell, not good at handing it. I didn't know what to do now. I wasn't good at this sort of thing, and the twins still felt too unfamiliar to me. I just wanted to fix it, make it better, without too much of a fuss, but I had a feeling that heavy emotions never worked out that easily.

There wasn't much I could say, either. "I'm sorry. You know I am. But I swear, no one knows. Literally, no one knows that Sokovia is like this. The rest of us have no idea because we aren't allowed inside. Sokovia's had closed borders for about as long as you've been trapped here."

"Closed borders?" Wanda repeated, scowling. She had that sharp, slightly judgmental tone, like she wasn't convinced.

"Yeah, whoever's running this place now decided they didn't want anyone coming or going," I said, holding out a hand in gesture to the building, to the country as a whole. I had forced my tone back to something more even, although I was just as surprised as they were that they didn't know. Looks like we all had some catching up to do. "And there's no one out there that can tell them — the Chairman — no. Sokovia's not part of the UN. We couldn't help you unless the government asked first."

"Well, that will never happen," Pietro snorted with a derisive toss of his head. He crossed his arms, fixing me with a similar look to his sister's. "If you know so much, then how do we fix this?"

"Fix this?" I gaped at him.

"Yes! Sokovia! I will not just sit here and watch my home lay to waste!"

"Look, man, I just woke up in a hospital yesterday!" I shot back, feeling rather put-upon. I was just starting to get my bearings in this strange country, and now he wanted me to help liberate it? "I don't even know who the Chairman is, or who he works for, or how the hell this place ended up looking like 1984!"
Pietro and Wanda exchanged incredulous glances. Wanda said, "We thought you already knew that. You had a Cold War with them. Why do you think the Chairman calls his personal spies the Komitet?"

"What?" It took me a second to parse through what she was saying. When it hit me, it felt like a huge weight had been dropped into my stomach. "Wait, you don't mean... The KGB?" When she nodded, I added, "But they were disbanded in 1991! They weren't even a part of Sokovia, they —"

"Came here, when the Soviet Union fell," Wanda said simply, with a shrug so casual like she was talking about the weather. "What survived created something new. This State has been decades in the making, and we are only a small part of its success."

"Wait, so you're saying that the KGB kidnapped me?" I said, throwing out my arms before they fell limp to my sides. This felt like a bad movie, and I had the sinking feeling it was only getting started. "The KGB turned me into... this?!"

There was no surprise in the twins’ gazes, only a grim reality that they had accepted long ago. I felt something hollow open up in my chest as I faced it, too, realizing it was something too big to escape from. Their previous rage had been replaced by something quieter. Broken. And here they were, watching me trying to deny it like some naive idiot who thinks there's been a huge mistake.

But there couldn't be. A secret this big, a power so great, that they couldn't have picked me on accident, at random.

My voice was a little strangled when I asked, "...Why? Who am I to them?"

"Who are you?" Wanda said with a laugh, but it was humorless. It reminded me of the way Astor laughed, but Wanda wasn't laughing at me. At least, I didn't think so. Didn't mean it didn't hurt any less. "You are asking the wrong questions, Amelia. You do not have a name to them. None of us did. You were not human in their eyes. They made you, like they made Captain America. A Super Soldier."

"Just another weapon," Pietro finished quietly. "Designed to kill. Their Soldatka."

Their words were like a slap to the face. My ears rung, my fingers tingling.

"A weapon," I repeated, a hoarse whisper, my arms hanging limp at my side. My gaze slid from Pietro and Wanda, to the floor at my feet, feeling like I was floating, off-center, dazed. "I'm a weapon."

"Amelia —" Wanda raised her hand, reaching out for me, but I flinched away when she touched my arm.

"N-no —" I only shook my head, frantic, voice lodged in my throat. Her hand pulled back, sudden, surprise and worry on her face as I stumbled away from them, the row seating coming up against the back of my knees. I gripped the wooden back of the chair, trying to catch my breath. "I can't, I mean, I-I can't be..."

I stopped, took a deep breath. "I need to think."

And before either of them could stop me, I turned on my heel and swept out of the theater.
Designed to kill.

Hell of a word choice, Pietro.

But was he wrong? It echoed in my head as I paced in that room of mirrors, muttering under my breath, clenching and unclenching my fists. If someone were to walk in at this very moment, they'd probably see a blonde teenager about to have a psychotic break.

What if I did, though? What if I really was losing my mind? It wasn't like the people who made me like this were considering my emotional or mental health, if Wanda and Pietro's account was anything to go by. I wasn't a person to the Crucible. I wasn't even human.

No, no, stay rational, I told myself as I felt another wave of panic about to overwhelm me. I couldn't let myself out of control. Panicking now wouldn't help me.

I didn't want anyone to see me like this. Certainly not the twins. They already considered me a liability, not remembering what they wanted me to remember, so I couldn't imagine they'd be pleased to see how much I was breaking up inside. God, I felt so weak.

But what the hell was I supposed to do? How often did a normal person have to deal with this hurricane of emotions, a maelstrom of trauma and old wounds, not quite healed. As if I didn't have my own problems to worry about, I couldn't help but stew over the twins' story, their awful beginning. I thought my childhood was rough, but now all the hospital trips and illnesses seemed like a cakewalk compared to growing up in a war zone. To losing your parents, your home, to bombs? It was nearly an alien concept to Americans, who haven't felt anything like that since 9/11 — and before that, Pearl Harbor. How awful how that would have been, if it had lasted not just a day, but entire years.

Thinking about it now, it didn't surprise me that the KGB had plucked up Wanda and Pietro Maximoff, as they had plucked me; two lost kids with little to no protection, who couldn't defend themselves, who felt powerless and alone.

And look what the KGB did. Made them strong. Made them two of the most powerful people on this Earth.

And let the pain fester until it dug too deep, irreversible.

I didn't ask, but I'd be kidding myself if neither Wanda nor Pietro wanted revenge. On the Chairman, on Stark. On everyone?

And why wouldn't they. It was them against the world.

What do I do? What could I do, that would mean anything?

Despite myself, a burst of laughter left my lips, startling and deranged. Here I was, a Super Soldier trained by the KGB, and this was probably the millionth time since waking up in the hospital I felt as useless and weak as I had before they took me. On the inside, I was still Little Mia, the sullen but soft-hearted girl who couldn't do anything for herself.

I didn't want to be her anymore. I never wanted to be her, but I settled because what choice did I have then? Before, I thought what I lacked in physical strength, I made up for in internal fortitude. Was I just kidding myself? Was I ever as strong as I wanted to believe I was?

Strong enough to get through this?
Back and forth, back and forth. My footsteps filled the empty room, rhythmic and only slightly soothing. My reflection followed me, tossing her head, hair too short, legs too long.

And that's when it occurred to me. No one was going to help me this time. There was no 9-1-1 here, no good police or FBI, there was no Peter with the spare inhaler to save me at the last moment. If I was going to die, then I would die.

The only person who could get me out of this was myself.

I paused in my pacing, staring at my reflection. This realization was both powerful and terrifying at once. Terrifying, because I had never been on my own like this before, how uncertain everything was, how fast and easy everything could go wrong, and no one to rescue me if they did. If I made a mistake, it would be on me. The incident between the Cheka and the Komitet had been partly my fault, and I couldn't be stupid enough to let it happen again.

But it was powerful, because — for the first time in my life — I had complete and utter control over my own fate.

I didn't have anyone else. Just this stranger in the mirror. A girl who could run. A girl who could fight.

Me.

The girl in the mirror stared back, gray eyes wide. Wide shoulders, strong legs, powerful lungs, a beating heart that wasn't killing me. The Mia of yesterday couldn't do what I needed to do.

Maybe I was designed to kill, just as the Crucible intended. Maybe the twins had a point, the old Mia was too weak to rely on. Maybe both were right, and I wasn't good enough either way.

But no one was going to tell me who I was.

No more mistakes. No more slip-ups. My hand clenching, I raised it and slammed it at my face.

Glass cracked and shattered under my knuckles, and my reflection fractured, splitting in every direction. A thousand shimmering pieces. I wasn't going to let them tell me who I am.

Who I needed right now wasn't either the weapon or the girl.

And I knew what I had to do.

Five minutes later, I strode back into the theater hall. Pietro and Wanda were talking quietly to each other, eating food that they must have taken while I was busy thinking. But they stopped what they were doing to look up at me, first surprised, then expressions turning scrutinizing when they saw my face and, I suppose, noticed something different. Pietro tilted his head and asked, "Amelia? Are you okay?"

"Y-yes," I came to a stop in front of them, clenching my fists and steeling my nerves, remembering my goal. Don't stutter, don't falter. The choice was already made and I was going to see this through. This was only the first step. "I know what I'm going to do now."

They stood slowly, exchanging looks of concern. I knew my next words were going to be judged, so I had to pick them carefully.

But there was only one way to say it. I took a deep breath, met their eyes, and set my jaw. "I'm getting the hell out of Sokovia."
Chapter End Notes

*Dai - Romani for mother.
*Dat - Romani for father

The original Wanda and Pietro Maximoff had a Romani mother, Magda, and I want to keep that for this fic, along with the hint that their father is Erik Lensherr/Magneto :)
"Leave Sokovia?" Wanda gaped at me as I strode past her, going for the radio.

"You mean," Pietro stood up at the same time, holding his bandaged hand close to his chest. Guess Wanda applied some First Aid while I was busy giving myself a pep talk. "You are going to America?"

"Yes," I said, pausing to face them. Here came the part — I kept my voice firm, to hide my worry, self-consciousness. I averted my gaze, because it was easier, and started fiddling with the tuning dials of the radio as I said, "I'm not going to wait for someone to save me, and I'm not staying in Sokovia. I'm getting out of here, one way or another."

Pietro tilted his head, curious. I couldn't tell if he was impressed or skeptical. "And what makes you speak like this?"

"I don't know," I could only shrug, glancing back to study the radio dials, feeling self-conscious. It helped to find the right words when I wasn't watching their faces. "It just seems like the smart thing to do. I mean, you guys were right. I can't be who I was before. Just because the Crucible...created me, doesn't mean I'm going to let them control me."

I had concluded that I couldn't think myself weak anymore. Not just in the physical sense, but mentally as well. And I was taken aback by how hard it was just to do that.

It seems counter-intuitive, to want to feel weak — no one likes the idea of not being able to defend themselves, of being at a disadvantage, of being oppressed in some way or another. No one wants to be a victim. But the thought itself, deciding to be weak, was still so seductive. I've lived my whole life thinking myself as a victim, of it being me against the world. It's so easy to think that way, and now I get why it was so hard to pull out of it.

Because seeing myself as a victim — of chance, of fate, of biology, of society, of evil Communists, of whatever — was basically absolving myself of any responsibility I had for myself or my choices. I could be a total bitch to Mom or Peter or anyone, and not feel bad about it because I was convinced about being seen as "less" by them — but the only person who saw me as lesser was myself.

That just meant I blamed everyone, including my own friends and family, of things that weren't even their fault, that they weren't even guilty of. Essentially, I gave myself a get-out-of-jail-free card every time I failed. To not even bother trying at all. It wasn't just my previous condition that made me that way; I couldn't use that excuse anymore, and I shouldn't have used it then.

And I can't fall into that again. I wasn't going to survive if I did. The Crucible, the Chairman, his agents, won't give a shit if I'm a "victim" or not. They were going to kill me either way.

Now all I could think about was the massive apology I'd have to give to Mom and Peter when I finally got back.
Already, it's making me cringe, but deep down, I was honestly looking forward to it. If I got the chance to apologize, that meant I lived long enough to make it home. And being home again was all I wanted. If apologizing for the rest of my life to them meant it would happen, then so be it.

"And right now," I finished. "all I have to do is figure out the best way how."

"Oh, we will let you know," Wanda said with a smirk, crossing her arms. She seemed amused that I couldn't get the radio to work.

I blinked at her, surprised, as she walked up next to me and peered over the radio — it had clearly been brought here by someone else; the twins, maybe? Over twenty years old, the radio was hardly state of the art, and I was having a hell of a time trying to get anything besides white noise out of it. "Um, what do you mean?"

"Well, you don't think you are getting out of Sokovia alive by yourself, do you?" Wanda glanced at me and raised a skeptical eyebrow. Inaudible chatter was starting to come through as I continued to play with the radio.

"You want to help?" I asked, looking between her and Pietro, who had come up behind his sister. "Guys, I can't ask you to —"

"You do not have to ask!" Pietro laughed, shaking his head. Sharing another amused look with Wanda, he added, "It is simple. We will go with you to America!"

"But it's so far away," I pointed out, not quite able to comprehend what they were doing. I hadn't thought of asking the because I didn't think it was fair. "And Sokovia is your home."

"And it is," Wanda assured, but a sadness fell across her face. She sighed, bowed her head, hair falling into her face. "But Sokovia has changed since we last remember it, and it is no longer safe for us here. Not when the Crucible is so close."

"We will come back, eventually," Pietro said with a slight shrug of the shoulders. "We will come back and help fix Sokovia. But we have been trapped for so long…I want to see what the world has become."

"Well, it won't be easy." I said, a last-ditch attempt to dissuade them. I wasn't even sure why — maybe I was afraid of the responsibility. If anything went wrong, if anything happened to them, it'd be my fault.

But Wanda just gave a roll of her eyes. "Please. Nothing I have ever known has been easy."

"We made it this far, no?" Pietro held up his arms, that lazy, self-assured smile on his face again. I still couldn't tell if it was bravado or not, or if everything that had happened recently was really so simple or easy. I had the itching feeling he was just trying to butter me up when he added, "You brought us home, so we will bring you home. It is, what you call it, ohana."

Well, if he was trying to butter me up, it worked. A grinned bloomed across my face, surprised and delighted. The pedant in me wanted to correct the meaning of ohana — then I realized Pietro wasn't wrong at all. This was family. This was what family did for each other. It struck me deep, filling that hole in my chest that had been empty ever since I heard Peter's voice over the phone. That missing thing, lost and found.

I guess my expression was everything they needed to know about my opinion on the matter, because Wanda said, "If you start crying again, I am going to hit you."
"What? I'm not crying!"

"No, but you were going to," Wanda shot back, then stood up, clapping her hands together, jerking her chin at the radio. "Works now. What did you want it for? Music?"

"Thanks." I said, leaning over to turn up the volume dial. "But no, information."

"Information?" Pietro said, coming to crouch down next to me. The radio, sitting on an armrest, had a long series of extension cords running off and into the darkness of the theatre. "About what, Sokovia?"

"Let's just say my little stunt this morning is probably going to have some negative side effects," I said, which was probably an understatement. Thankfully, Wanda had found a news station and the current sound, a Russian folk song I'd never heard of, was starting to fade out.

Still, he appreciated my attempt at humor and chuckled. The speakers started to filter out a male voice, announcing first the basic news:

"It is three'o'five PM, October 30th, and here in Novi Grad the State has just issued another statement about the incident that occurred earlier this morning. They assure the public that the situation is under control, and investigations into the suspects are already underway —"

"Which means they have no idea what happened," Wanda interjected with a snort.

"The State assures the public that this morning's incident is unrelated to the recent bombings, orchestrated by the Sokovian Underground. The Chairman promises that the Underground will be vanquished before the anniversary of the New Year's Revolution, and says there will be a great celebration of historic proportions, once Sokovia is finally free from terror. On to other news: the weekly import from Yugoslavia has finally come in, after a recent snowfall caused an avalanche to block the tracks in the Black Diamond mountain range. The train will be coming in two days to Novi Grad to deposit the goods before departing immediately. The State assures the public that they have no fear of shortages, and that the delay has caused only minimal problems, which have been rendered unnoticeable to the public due to the State's hard efforts. Remember, the State loves you, and serves you. And now for better news! The Russian Prime Minister Krovopuskov will be visiting Sokovia in two weeks for a meeting with our glorious Chairman and the General Serov, to discuss treaties that will be of mutual benefit to both countries, as well as celebrate our illustrious Slavic heritage."

Pietro sniffed. "They just want to kiss up to the Russians. The Chairman is powerful, but no one has an army as large and formidable as Russia. He is gaining power even faster than we realized…"

Unfortunately, that was a non-issue at the moment. I could only shake my head. "Right now, we have other things to worry about. Getting out of Sokovia is our first priority. All this conspiracy stuff is going to have to wait. Maybe when we get out, we can tell the U.N., and once they know, Russia will think twice before dealing with the Chairman."

"Like they will listen to us." Wanda muttered, scowling. "We are just children to them. Stupid, annoying children who know nothing of the world. They will not care."

"They might," I said again, emphasizing the word. Wanda's negativity was almost toxic, and I partly wanted to agree with her, that the U.N. Leaders weren't going to take the word of ragtag group of runaway teenagers. But I couldn't let it break my confidence, or my hope. "There's a way to do it right, I'm sure. But like I said, I can't worry about it right now. I'm sorry."
"No, it is fine," Wanda inhaled deeply through her nose, before sighing, her shoulders deflating. She sunk down next to Pietro, dropping her forehead onto his shoulder. "A world like this, it is easy to forget that there are people like you. People who still care."

"You are trying." Pietro added. "You are helping us. Right now, that is all we need."

✮✮✮

The next two days were precious, most of which I spent planning. There was definitely something happening in Novi Grad — the twins didn't want me leaving the theatre, because of the incident, but I heard all I needed to hear from them each time they came back.

"The streets are getting tighter every hour," Pietro said the next evening, coming home with dinner — potato chips and cans of tuna. "It's getting dark out but people are still outside. Waving signs. They know the State is lying to them."

"It is because they have no more patience," Wanda replied, keeping up next to him. She carried the goods while he zipped in and out. Throwing a bag of chips at me, sitting in one of the seats and surrounded by yellow notepaper, she added, "The bombings by the Sokovian Underground have hurt more civilians than they've helped, and the State has done nothing to stop them. I do not know how the Underground does it, how they can get away with it, but I wish they knew how to focus their efforts better. Perhaps we can actually liberate Sokovia if we all unite. The only thing the Underground has achieved is making the people distrust both them and the State."

"Do you think the State will be able to calm them down?" I asked, glancing down at my notes. Getting out of the city meant actually having a way out. If something else happened, something bad caused by either upset civilians or the Underground, then that was just going to turn the State's eyes on us all the sharper. "It sounds like the Underground is trying to provoke an uprising."

"They probably are," Pietro shrugged, sitting down next to me and on top of a bunch of paper. It crunched under him, but he didn't seem to notice my irritated look. "But the State has crushed rebellions before. Many, innocent civilians, men, women, children — die each time. Now the people know better."

But Wanda, toeing a piece a paper on the floor around to read my notes, remained oddly silent. Pietro and I shared a glance, before looking back at her. I asked, "Is something wrong, Wanda?"

Her head jolted up, and she smiled at us, but hesitated before she said, "N-no, I'm fine."

As someone who always used the phrase "I'm fine", I knew she wasn't. I frowned slightly, unsure how to broach the topic, and in a moment of clarity I suddenly understood Peter's frustration with me, that night of the fight. Wanda said it once and already I couldn't decipher what it meant; I could only imagine what it must've been for Peter, who heard that phrase over and over in his life, knowing something was wrong, but never knowing what until it was too late.

I couldn't let that happen again. So, I said, "It's okay if you tell us. If something's wrong, I want to know. Before it gets worse."

Wanda bit her lip, glancing away for a moment. I probably had that look on my face every time Peter
tried to talk to me about the doctors. How did he put up with me for long? How was he so patient? I could barely stand it.

Then she said. "Will it work? Your plan?"

I blinked at her. Next to me, Pietro spoke, sounding as surprised as I felt. "You have a plan, Amelia?"

"Y-yes," I stammered, tapping my pencil on the legal pad in my lap. Wanda was still looking at my notes. Did she already know what I was doing? "At least, it should. I want to leave within the month, at the latest. It'll give us enough time to prepare. Lay low for a little bit, get the State off our trail. And the Komitet, too. That woman...Brandt...she freaks me out. I don't like her, or any of her goons. Not when they can just turn into lava monsters or whatever. They scare me more than anything right now."

"That is wise." Pietro nodded next to me, pulling a piece of paper from under his butt, then peered at it, squinting. "What is this? English? I can barely read it."

"Because you can barely speak it," Wanda pointed out, while I plucked the paper from Pietro's fingers. I didn't expect him to read it anyway, with my still-illegible handwriting. Ah, dysgraphia, haunting me once again.

To that, I added, "Just some ideas I'm working out. I'd rather not run for the border the whole way. I mean, maybe you and Wanda can do it, just you two, but that'll wipe you out, Pietro, you won't be able to get much farther past the border. And with me tagging along? It won't work. Wastes too much energy. So, we stick together. It'll be slower, but it'll be safer."

"Hmm," Pietro looked a little displeased at that, popping open a bag of chips and stuffing a few in his mouth. "Well, if you say so. But I prefer to run."

"And you'll probably be doing plenty of that," I said, throwing him a smirk. "Just try not to leave us in the dust, okay?"

"What do you want me to do, then?"

"Maybe it's a little premature to say so," I started, flicking the end of my pencil at Wanda, who came up to sit on my other side. "But I'm gonna take a wild guess and say that Wanda is the most powerful out of the three of us —"

"Thank you," she said with a smug look, taking a can of tuna from her lap and opening turning up the lid with a spark of red magic.

"You're welcome. So, I want you to keep an eye on her, Pietro."

"What?!" Wanda blurted, at the same time Pietro just shrugged, "No problem. I do that all the time, anyways."

Wanda just huffed. "I can take care of myself. You do not have to protect me, Pietro."

"It is my job. I am oldest, after all."

"Only by twelve minutes!" Wanda shot back, looking supremely annoyed. "Hardly counts."

"Still older." Pietro said with an impish grin.
Wanda threw the can lid at him.

"Wow, I'm so glad I'm an only child right now," I said under my breath as they started to bicker with me stuck in the middle.

Eventually, Wanda had enough with Pietro's antics and shot out of her chair again, making a beeline for the radio — probably to drown out his laughter. I jabbed him with my elbow before she decided to hex his face, but my attention was diverted as the radio announcer's voice echoed into the theatre.

"The Cheka have now closed the city of Novi Grad and have implemented an around-the-clock curfew, ordering citizens to stay in their homes while they narrow in on their search for the American spy. It is not yet confirmed how long they have been here or the total extent of their crimes against the State, but we do know for certain that the spy is responsible for the death of nine Chekist soldiers, as well as aiding and abetting the escape of known Sokovian traitors. However, citizens have refused to obey — tensions have been high in the past few weeks thanks to various terrorist bombings, and the one that occurred yesterday seemed to have ignited a panic. Citizens, terrified of these attacks, have surged en masse to all city exits. Cheka are reinforcing these entry points to prevent any unlawful escapes. If the people of Novi Grad continue to resist and fall victim to their fears, the will face the consequences. General Serov, leader of the Cheka, has promised the citizens that the city is completely safe from further attacks, saying that he has caught the Resistance members responsible. The Citizens have nothing to fear, and should comply with the State's reasonable quarantine of seventy-two hours while the Cheka ensure the city's safety. Please, all citizens, if you are currently outside, return to your homes immediately, and all will be well."

"Shit," I said, jumping out of my seat and sending the papers smattering — not that they were going to be of any use to me anymore. None of it accounted for this. "This isn't good. This is not good at all…"

"It's an uprising!" Pietro threw up his hands, but he sounded angry, instead of excited. "I told you! The Underground has pushed the country too far."

"The State certainly did their part," Wanda said, eyeing me as I began to pace, the announcer's voice continuing to rattle off news. "Now one of two things will happen. The country will explode, as it should. Or it will be crushed again, under the boot heel of the State."

"Either way," I said, tapping my chin as the thoughts ran through my head. All the possibilities, all the options we had now. "We'll be having a hell of a time getting out. How long would it take, for the State to lock down the entire city? Assuming they haven't already."

"Two days, perhaps," Wanda shrugged. "Depends on how much trouble the city gives them. Longer, then, by the sound of it. Third day, those seventy-two hours, will be too late. They are lying when they say that the quarantine will be over by then. It will not be over until they've caught us."

"Great." I flicked my hand, turning on my heel for another lap. "The timeline's moved up now. Instead of a month, we've got three days, at best. I don't want to wait that long. We need to head out ASAP. Tomorrow evening at the latest."

"Tomorrow?" Pietro repeated, shocked. "But we have nothing! No supplies! We will not make it a day out there!"

"Then we take it a day at a time," I snapped, rounding on him. Pietro jumped a little, leaning back in his seat. I took a deep breath, evened my tone. "Sorry. But tomorrow morning, we gather all the supplies we can. Food, bags, clothes for the cold. We're not going to have a cozy theatre to sleep in every night once we get out of Novi Grad. Our biggest problem is still getting out of here alive."
Everything after that, well...we'll cross that bridge when we get there."

"Does that sound doable?" I asked, glancing between the both of them, hands on my hips. "Can you get us what we need by noon tomorrow? I want to be on the streets by then."

"But that'll make it easier for the Cheka to catch us," Wanda pointed out. "Or the Komitet!"

"Not if the protests continue like they are," I said, pointing at her. "If the people stay angry, there'll be more on the streets. We stick to the protests, okay? We blend in with the crowd, follow them towards the gates. The Cheka won't be able to spot us among all of those people."

"And the Komitet, if they are there?" Pietro demanded. "What if they decide to go all Vulkan if they see us?"

"They won't," I said, and earned a disbelieving look. "They won't because they know they'll cause a panic if they do that. Protests are bad for governments like this, but what's worse is a stampede, a riot, people totally out of control. The State can't do anything if the people are too afraid to listen to them, and the Komitet won't betray that. Not for us. Honestly, I don't expect them to be there at all, anyways."

"But they're still looking for us!"

"They think we'll be hiding. In places like this. They'll be spread out across the entire city, knocking down doors. So, we play them, we go out where they least expect us to go. They think we're just some scared, stupid kids who don't know anything about the world," I said, and Wanda did a double-take when she recognized her own words.

I smiled at her. "So, we prove them wrong."

✮✮✮

I barely got any sleep that night.

I just stared at the ceiling, going over my plan in my head, trying to think of anything I might have forgotten.

But it was vague. It had to be. A good plan never survived after first contact. I wasn't sure where I heard that, but there was logic to that statement. No matter what happened, I had to count on something going wrong tomorrow, and I had to plan for it. Somehow.

In the end, though, I knew. When it came down to it, I'll end up thinking on my feet, guessing second to second, hoping that it was the right one.

I could only hope — pray — that I'd survive. That we all would.

I suppose I drifted off eventually, because next thing I knew, I was being shaken awake by Wanda, who had box of warm muffins under her arm. She and Pietro had already gone out while I was asleep, gotten the first round of things we needed — food.

The next time they came back, an hour later, Pietro returned with clothes, and a backpack for each of
us. The thing that caught my eye, though, was the bright yellow raincoat on his arm, which to my surprise he threw right at me. I caught it, but the billowing air scattered the papers on the floor around me.

"This is for you," he said, as I felt the rubbery coat in my hands. "Wear it when we go outside again."

"Why?" I asked, frowning at the coat. It was heavy, not exactly winter ready, but I was a little startled by the color. I was currently wearing that green military jacket the nurse had given me. It hadn't occurred to me until now that taking random clothes (stealing, whatever), was going to make me look like a walking thrift shop.

Not that it was a bad thing.

"So we can find you," Pietro said, tossing an apple to Wanda, who earlier had complained about too much junk food. He came to sit down next to me, prodding me in the shoulder. "I've seen the crowds. You are right, they keep getting bigger. Easy to get lost in, though. Yellow will make it easier to see you."

"Wouldn't it also make it easy for the bad guys to see me, too?"

"Ah..." Pietro paused, eyebrows shooting up, indicating he hadn't thought of that. Then he just made a face. "Well, better they shoot at you than either of us."

I punched him in the shoulder for that one, laughing despite myself. "Ugh, you're such a jerk!"

"Ah, and this," Pietro winced away from me with hands raised in surrender, before pulling a wad of wool out of his pocket. It unfolded in his hand, revealing itself to be a striped red-and-white scarf. "Is also for you. I saw it and thought it would remind you of home."

"Aww," I said, taking it and pulling it around my neck, before grinning at him. "Thanks, Pietro, that's so sweet!"

"Bah! Do not get gross on me. While you get that shiny new jacket and scarf," Pietro said, kicking off his old sneakers and putting on new ones. "I get new shoes. I wish they stop making ones that burn up so quickly."

"They burn up because you run faster than they're made for," I said, throwing up my hand like it was obvious. "I'm surprised they haven't actually caught on fire yet."

"Oh, they have!" Wanda called from her spot, sitting up on the stage. She was currently practicing her magic, or whatever it was. Lifting up old chairs, suspended in balls of red sparkling light. Her fingers bent and twisted in an almost macabre fashion, matching the light in her eyes. "They should make you shoes out of car tire, Pietro. Big ugly things that suit your face."

"Ha-ha," Pietro rolled his eyes, although he looked a little miffed. He flicked his head, running a hand through his hair, and I had to hide my smirk at the preening. "You may be the most powerful, sister, but I think we can all agree I am the most attractive, yes?"

Wanda and I stared at him, then looked at each other, before we burst out laughing.

"In that case," Wanda said, wiping a tear from her eye. "Amelia must have the brains, because you have none!"

"Hey!" Pietro complained, but ended up joining us in the laughter nonetheless — it was no use, after
all. In the last moments of our safety, we were enjoying it as much as I could.

We had our last meal in the theater; lunch being fruit, water, and the last of the morning's muffins. Pietro ate most of it, as was expected, but at this moment I wasn't going to complain, even if I was a little hungrier than I liked to admit. The more Pietro ate, the longer he could run, and I had a feeling we'd be relying more on that than anything else today.

The clock turned twelve, and I stood up, shrugging on the yellow jacket. Despite what Pietro said, he had a point. The green jacket made it too easy for me to be overlooked, and I suppose if anyone could afford the proverbial spotlight, it was me. I was a Super Soldier, after all.

Whatever that really meant.

Together, we walked out of the theater, and into the blistery cold of late October, before coming to a stop, taking in the sight before us. Passing in front of the theater was a marching protest, already pushing at the sides of street. It was a parade unlike I'd ever seen before; I've never seen this many people even during the Macy's Thanksgiving Parade. It was huge; the protest was just a massive, churning swarm of people, their stomping feet and chanting filling the air. Even as we watched, more people joined from the adjacent buildings, flooding out of doorways and adding their signs and voices to the chorus.

It was, in a word, awe-inspiring.

Pietro was holding Wanda's hand as we were pushed to the side, not yet going in. Pietro, with his new shoes, and Wanda, with thick red tartan shawl wrapped around her head and torso like a cloak. Like her, I followed suit, putting up my own yellow hood, and Pietro did the same with his blue hoodie.

Standing together on that street, we looked like we were up to no good, and it occurred to me that today was Halloween in America. Kids, looking like us, would be trick-or-treating and causing mayhem tonight.

Sharing a nod, we stepped into the crowd, and joined the protest.

Time to start some mayhem.
art by me :)

I have this headcanon that when Pietro was younger, his hair was covered in white dust when he first escaped the rubble of his home, which is why he dyes his hair white later on in life, as a reminder of what he lost 😞
Chapter Eighteen

Chapter Summary

We're In This Together // Nine Inch Nails
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9BfvPjsXXw

Chapter Eighteen

✮

The march was thick and swarming. Although I hung onto Pietro's sleeve, I kept getting pulled away, jostled back and forth until I ended up behind them.

This was fine, however. I decided that as long as I kept the back of their hoods in sight, then I will be fine. They already know how to find me. My yellow coat really did stick out here, and I shrunk into it, as if I could somehow hide.

But no one took much notice of me. The waving signs and beating chants were far more conspicuous. The three of us weaved our way into the middle of the parade, to hide better amongst the constantly moving people. Nothing ever stayed in one place for long. No one was really marching in line, just pushing forward, pushing, pushing. They wanted to get to the gates, they wanted to get out.

"We! Are! Free!" They chanted. "Open! The! Gates!"

And forward we went, facing little resistance. The sky was overcast, heavy clouds hanging low over the sky, and I wondered if it might actually snow. I doubted it would actually do anything to dissuade anyone here.

The people around me, the Sokovians, seemed to have come from all walks of life, although I noticed many had old, patchy clothes. A healthy number wore red armbands — Communists? I wondered to myself. They raised these arms with pride. Others waved red cloths, bandanas, hats. Men, women, and even children were here, ages ranging from nine to ninety, heads raised and voices joined as one.

It was inspiring, in a way, speaking as someone who wasn't quite part of it. I wasn't Sokovian, but I liked this, I liked being a part of this much bigger whole, fighting for something worth fighting for.

In the midst of the massive parade, it was surprisingly easy to get lost. I got pulled away from the twins three times, much to my discomfort, only to run into them again. Wanda and Pietro kept their eyes focused ahead, unlike me who kept looking around, trying to take everything in. The determined look in their eye made me feel young and inexperienced, the way they seemed to know what they were doing; but I had my own worries, and I'd feel stupid if I didn't take in as much of the situation as possible.

I could feel it in the air. The march was a powder keg just waiting for the right spark to explode.
Losing control would be utter disaster for the Cheka.

We had been in the march for less than an hour before I started to sense a slowing in our pace, everyone coming in a little closer as the way forward came to a halt. One turn later and we ended up in a market square — on either side lined the war-torn buildings, storefronts darkened and closed. Either hiding or already joined the protest.

Ahead, I could see the city gates, metal bars closed and locked together by thick chains. Between us and that, however, were two lines of Cheka, in their brown suits and weapons, aimed at the sky. They were protected by a third line of soldiers standing in front of them, all carrying ballistic shields, lined up to form an impenetrable glass wall.

They seemed laughably small compared to the force that was the Sokovian citizens. Would the Cheka even stand a chance?

Either way, it was enough; their weapons and armor, the authoritative force they carried, still carried enough fear or respect from the protestors. As the parade drew closer, the Cheka stood strong, and didn't recede even as civilians came right up to them, pressing against them — shouting, clapping, stomping, even hitting the shields marked with ВЧК, but this last action was met with quick retribution, with the Cheka snapping the shields or their batons forward, striking anyone who dared get too physical. In a mostly unarmed crowd, it was enough to send the parade back a few steps.

But there was nowhere else to go. Within minutes the square was almost completely packed; if I felt a little crowded before, I was positively squashed now. There was barely enough room to breathe, much less move.

Wanda and Pietro darted away after a final look between us, a silent nod of agreement. There was no saying how long this would take, or long we had before things got worse, so it was best to get moving immediately.

It was Wanda's job to get to the gates and open them with her magic. At this point I knew to call it telekinesis, but 'magic' just sounded cooler. This same magic is what she used to turn the attention away from her, red light flickering in the eyes of the soldiers and witnesses she passed when sneaking the long way around, hugging the edge of the street and coming up against the city walls.

Meanwhile, Pietro went the other way, heading to the front of the protest, where he'd be able to keep an eye on his sister without slowing her down. Two people sneaking around was a lot more noticeable than one, and the silver streak of his speed would only draw more attention. Taking the slow route had not been something easy to agree with for Pietro, but I didn't want to take any chances, since we were already Sokovia's Most Wanted.

As it was, Pietro seemed really into the protest, chanting with everyone else, and I knew he wanted to do more than just stand around and shouting. He wanted to fight.

Hopefully, it wouldn't come to that.

Once the gates opened, I suspected the control the Cheka had, with their comparatively small line of men against the massive protest, would finally break. The three of us would escape in the mad rush everyone would have to leave the city. The Cheka would be overrun and no one would know that the three most notorious persons of Novi Grad — maybe all of Sokovia — had escaped.

My job was to be the distraction, should anything bad happened. The idea was a heavy dread in my stomach; I didn't know if I could hold up, should I make myself a target. I'd have to fight. Would I be able to? Would I even stand a chance?
What I was really afraid of, though, was freezing up again, like I had the last time with the Cheka and Komitet. The fact that I was still alive right now was entirely thanks to them. But I couldn't keep forcing my life in their hands, like a helpless kitten with no claws. I shouldn't be the one taken care of. Pietro and Wanda were relying on me.

And I didn't want to fail them again.

Wanda, her head covered in that red hood, crept low as she snuck behind the line of Cheka. No one seemed to have noticed her yet. I was afraid of the possibility that one of the protestors would notice her and point her out, perhaps as a cry for strength, which they'd probably see it as — but it'd only put her in more danger. If the Cheka noticed her first, then that was less people to deal with.

The gates, closed with that massive chain, looked nearly impossible to break. For me, at least. For Wanda, well, it was probably going to be a piece of cake. I lost sight of her at one point, when she hid behind an empty cart, but I saw her handiwork in the swirls of red energy winding its way around the chains of the gate. Each link was about the size of my head, and the entire thing had to be over twenty feet long — it stretched across road between the two guard towers on either side, interlocked with the metal bars of the gate.

The gate itself was made of a combination of steel bars and sheet metal. It was short enough that I could imagine climbing over it, although the barbed wire at the top was a little discouraging. The armed Cheka waiting in the guard towers were also a little concerning, but they hadn't seen Wanda either.

Or so I thought.

I should've guessed someone would notice the noise of a link breaking when Wanda snapped it in two — Crack! It echoed across the square, cutting straight through the noise of the protest. Even I could hear it, from way back where I stood, and it made me jump.

The line of Cheka shifted nervously at the noise and a few glanced behind them. In the very back stood an officer, standing on top of a crate so he could speak over everyone's heads. He had a megaphone in hand, aimed at the crowd, but whatever came out of it was a garbled noise that no one could understand. When he heard the noise, he jabbed a finger at one soldier and directed him towards the gates.

The chain falls, two halves swinging back to their towers and clanging against the brick walls. The guards in their towers peered over the edge and shouted at each other, while the third soldier wandered over, checking each little hiding spot along the way.

Oh, no. I spotted Wanda again, her face framed by her dark hair, peering around some boxes to get a good look at her work — only to spot the incoming soldier and disappearing from sight again.

Already I could tell — she was trapped. Wanda wouldn't be able to get out of there without being seen. Using her magic to escape wouldn't be enough; if she missed out even a second, then someone would raise the alarm.

The gates were mechanized, still shut. I couldn't believe it when Wanda risked another peek out again, aiming to pry the two gates open.

No, no, she was going to get caught. Without thinking, I shouted, some words I couldn't remember later, hoping to somehow distract the Cheka — but the only attention I gained were the people closest to me, mildly annoyed that I wasn't shouting their chant.
It didn't work. I was too far away, especially from the wandering Cheka.

But I was desperate. I called out again, but I couldn't even hear myself this time. My voice was just another tiny addition to the chorus of hundreds. The soldier's eyes just fell past me as his attention was pulled to the gates once more. Wanda darted away with a flick of her red scarf. The man stepped towards the gates. Had he seen her?

No, no, he was turning around. At the same time to the left, the officer had pulled out his pistol, was waving it around as he gave frustrated orders to his men, tried aiming it around, as if it could ward off the protesting civilians. But either they didn't see it or they didn't care, because the march just pressed in closer, pushing the Cheka back.

The officer paused, his eyes focusing on something to the far left, out of sight. I turned my head, following his gaze. I stood tall enough that I could see over others and spot the distinctive silver mop of hair that was Pietro Maximoff.

His back was turned to the officer, currently engaged in a shouting match with a Cheka soldier trying to subdue a smaller woman. The soldier let her go when Pietro shoved him back into the line.

In front of me, something glinted in the officer's eyes, and he raised his gun.

Far back, the soldier prodded a pile of crates and wooden pallets with his rifle, searching for a hiding spot — too close, too close to Wanda. She wouldn't be able to get away without being seen.

And Pietro had no idea a gun was pointed at his head.

My mouth went dry as my eyes flicked between the two disasters about to take place before me. My mind scrambled for a solution, and I was suddenly surging forward, trying to push my way through the crowd. Pietro was closer, so I instinctively headed for him first.

But it was nearly impossible — there were just too many people. If the space had been clear, I could've run the ten meters between me and Pietro in less than two seconds — but now they were dragging by as I fought for every inch and fell back two more.

"Pietro!" I called out, but I might as well be shouting to God for all I knew. Pietro was too far away to hear, and even getting myself closer wasn't going to change the volume of the crowd.

He didn't even turn his head. The officer cocked his pistol. I pushed through shoulders and weaved around bodies, but it was no use — I'd never make it in time.

Starting to breathe too fast, my heart pounded even though it felt like I wasn't doing anything. Fighting this crowd was taking too much time, energy.

I couldn't let Pietro get hurt. I had to stop the soldier from finding Wanda. I didn't how to do just one of those things, but I knew I only had a few seconds to stop both.

I had to do something, but I was trapped in the crowd. Helpless.

Still making my way towards Pietro in a mad attempt to get him to hear me — so he could move and save Wanda — I got elbowed in the gut and my foot slipped stepping past legs. I stumbled, fell.

Shit! My breath was knocked out of me, and for a second, I felt stunned. My gaze dropped towards the ground, and I lost sight of everyone as I caught myself on the cold, cobblestone ground.

Hurried, I forced myself to breathe again, to fight the upset in my diaphragm, even though it hurt,
even though it didn't work.

For a second, I panicked. I couldn't fall. I was too late, wasting too much time. I'd never make it. I'd failed.

That's when I saw the rock.

Lying on the ground just a foot away, the rock was roughly the size of a baseball and what I had tripped on early. It gleamed at me, wet in the cold gray light, surrounded by a hundred shifting feet.

And I got an idea.

Air returned to my lungs, and my shoulders rolled smoothly as I reached for the rock. My fingers slid over its slick, smooth surface, weathered with age. I remembered what I had done with the apple Pietro had given me a few days ago — could I do it again?

Rock firmly in hand, I rose to my feet. Picking up my head, I turned away from Pietro, eyes focusing on the officer.

I wound my arm back. I didn't even reconsider my plan.

I knew it would work.

The officer took aim, closed one eye.

The soldier pushed aside a sheet of metal scrap, discovering the scarlet-cloaked girl crouched behind.

I slung the rock.

I watched at it sailed through the air, each second slowed, drawn out, as the black stone made a graceful arc over the heads of the crowd. Several heads turned up, startled, but it was too late. The black stone spun gently, revolving, as it started its descent, falling over the line of Cheka soldiers.

Before striking the officer in the temple.

At the same time, he pulled the trigger.

His head jerked back, completely blindsided. The gun recoiled wildly as he lost his balance, fell, dropped out of side as blood suddenly appeared across his face.

I only had a second to appreciate my work, my good aim.

To my left, Pietro whipped around, startled by the sound — somewhere behind him, someone screamed.

In that split second, between the rock hitting the officer and someone falling in the crowd, everything changed. It was like the start of an avalanche or an earthquake, the gentle shake before the colossal destruction. First came the shouts, the sudden crushing jam as the crowd around me backed up, stoked by the gunfire.

It was like the rock was the catalyst — another gunshot rang out only a split second later, as the protest was confused by the scream.

This time, a soldier fell.

And that was it.
That's when the Cheka attacked.

Pandemonium exploded.

Screams reached a crescendo as the Cheka opened fire on them, a volley of fire followed by the phalanx charging.

I was caught in the stampede as the protesters started running in a panic — every which way, so long as a Cheka wasn't there. Hands pushed, pulled yanked — clothes, hair, arms, legs — in a desperate attempt to escape.

My visual field dissolved into a confusing mess as everyone started moving, and didn't stop. Heads turns, bodies crushed, feet pounded the cobblestones to an entirely new beat now — the chanting replaced by discordant cries and shouting.

A few brave protestors remained, meeting the Cheka head-to-head, while the rest got away. That just escalated the noise, the fight — I heard gunshots and bangs behind me.

Somehow, I ended up next to a Cheka soldier, in the chaos of what was now a full-blown riot. He wielded a baton, brought it down repeatedly across the back of a man cowering on the ground, his hands raised in surrender. But the Cheka paid no regard, didn't let up even as the man cried for mercy.

Without thinking, I grabbed the baton just as the Cheka raised it over his head again. He made a noise of surprise, but didn't get the chance to look around before I yanked it out of his grip.

In one swift move, I flipped the baton in my hand and slammed it down against the back of the Cheka's knees.

He dropped down. Without breaking flow, I snapped the baton across the back of his head — the man went down with a grunt.

His victim stared up at me in shock, but I didn't hang around to explain. A skinny girl in a bright yellow jacket, taking down a soldier twice her size? I wondered what that looked like to them; There was no time.

Turning on my heel, baton in hand, I headed for the gates. I had to find Wanda and Pietro. I had to make sure they were all right.

And get those damn gates open.

The riot around me only escalated with each passing second. I fought against the crowd, a fish swimming upriver, towards the Cheka and their guns. I was already near the front when the peace broke, so it didn't take long for me.

An explosion behind me made me flinch and glance around, only to see that a car had been overturned and set on fire, shattered glass scattered around and citizens running away. I swiveled my head, spotted a flash of light in the window of a house behind me. A man, not a soldier, returning fire. Had the protesters brought back up?

I saw a bottle launched into the air, a flaming rag attached, before it fell over the heads of the Cheka and exploded. In return, two rioters went down in a hail of gunfire.

The sight of men dying felt like a punch to the gut. My fingers went numb and for a second, I couldn't breathe.
Then a scream jolted me back, and I looked away.

Smoke was filling the air all around me, and through them I saw bright flashes of lights, mini-explosions skittering along the ground. Flash-bang grenades, meant to stun and suppress. The Cheka's efforts only succeeded in making the air thick and bitter, clouding everything and making it difficult to see.

The smoke burned in my nose and made my eyes water, but I didn't slow down as I came face-to-face with another Cheka emerging from the dusty gray haze.

Armed with a ballistic shield and his own baton, the soldier didn't even pause to order me to stand down before attacking.

I saw it coming a mile away. He raised his shield and lowered his head for the charge, raising his baton like he was going to trample me like a rhino — but before he could strike me, I brought up my hand, grabbed the side of his shield, and simply ripped it out of his grip.

'Simply' being the key word here. I had no idea if I was strong enough to do that, but merely acted on my instincts — which, incredibly, were sound. I guess it was obvious, in retrospect, a super soldier with super strength, but I was still getting used to the idea.

At the same time, I sidestepped him and the Cheka stumbled, unbalanced by both the disarmament of his shield and lack of impact.

He cried out as I swiped my foot, tripping him as he passed, and watched as he landed hard on his face.

A shout behind me grabbed my attention before I could finish him off. Swiveling around, I saw the Cheka soldier and the gun, and had only a split-second to react.

I brought up my left arm to cover my face, a typical defensive move — only I'd forgotten I was still holding the riot shield.

I flinched when the bullet hit the glass right in front of my face. It cracked, but didn't break, and the bullet dropped harmlessly to my feet, clattering on the cobblestones.

Dropping the shield slightly, I studied the bullet for a moment before looking back up at the Cheka soldier who fired on me. He, too, looked stunned, and we just stood there, marveling at the fact that I wasn't dead.

The soldier, apparently realizing this was still a problem, remembered himself and began frantically reloading. He never got the chance to fire again.

I was on him in less than a second. Two great strides were all it took for me to slam the shield right into him, knocking him back. I hit him so hard, in fact, that he was knocked off his feet, gun sent out of his hands, and I kept going until I slammed into another Cheka soldier right behind him.

Both went down in a heap, and the three civilians warring with the fourth one gave me a quick nod of gratitude before darting off to deal with the next foe.

In that moment, I found myself alone in a small clearing. Smoke rose up like walls around me, and I could just barely see the gates to my right. They were still closed. I had yet to find Wanda or Pietro. I hoped they were still all right.

Then I saw a Cheka soldier trying to break down the door to a storefront. Through the window
cowered several civilians — several of whom were kids, no older than me. They tried barricading the door with tables and chairs, but clearly it wasn't enough, as the Cheka had already managed to wedge the door open a few inches.

The kids tried to escape, but they couldn't without leaving the door unguarded. Some were trying to keep it closed with their weight alone. I saw a woman, maybe the oldest among them, with blood covering her face. I could hear her shouting even from here, to tell the kids to run while they could.

They retreated into the darkness of the store. The woman tried fighting against the Cheka, keeping the door closed, but it wasn't enough. With one good kick, he smashed it down, sending the woman sprawling back. The kids cried out as the large man stepped inside. They stood, gathered helplessly, as he raised his gun.

Then — he was gone. Vanished from the doorway, as I grabbed him by the shoulders and yanked him off his feet. There was a collective cry of shock as I threw him aside like a garbage bag. He landed on the trunk of a car, and didn't get up.

I thought that was it, until something grabbed me from behind. A baton came up over my head, slamming against my throat, gripped by two hands on either side. I choked as my attacker tried to force me back, but I refused to bend to his will.

Instead, I threw my body forward, bending at the waist while reaching up and grabbing his arms (in the process dropping my own improvised weapons). With my momentum, I used his own strength against him as I flipped the Cheka soldier over my head and slammed him into the ground in front of me.

He was already unconscious by the time I kicked away his weapon, rubbing at the new bruise forming on my neck.

The woman scrambled to her feet, rushing over to the kids and trying to wrap her arms around as many of them as possible, whispering quick assurances as a few began to cry.

When they looked to me, I saw their fear, their awe. Their curiosity, confusion. The woman looked the most suspicious, and she demanded, "Who are you?"

I swallowed, lowered my arms. It didn't sound like she was asking who I was so much as what I was.

"Just go!" I told them, pointing to the back door, the safest way out for them. "Come back when it's safe!"

I didn't know if they wanted to come back, if they had any intention of leaving the city, but I had to believe I wasn't the only one, that the protest had happened for a reason. That this riot, this death, had a reason.

They all nodded, pushing back, rushing out. A few kids threw glances over their shoulders, giving me one last look before they disappeared back into Novi Grad.

Considering my work done here, I turned around to face the square again.

And saw the bullet sliding past my face.

"Amelia!"

Two hands clamped down on my arms, and I felt a sudden warm air surrounding me, like a summer
wind. It was bizarre, on top of that, to watch the path of the bullet, passing me by in slow motion. I saw its spin, its elongated bronze shape piercing the air, missing me by inches, before slipping past, embedding itself into the wall behind me.

My gaze pulled away as the ground disappeared beneath me in a silver rush.

Woomph. I hit the ground again, stumbling at the sudden halt. Pietro still had a hold of my arm, steadied me while my head spun. "Be careful! There are snipers out!"

"Fantastic!" I said, as he pulled me down behind a low brick wall. The dizziness faded quickly and I saw that Pietro had zipped me away to the other side of the square, out of the line of fire of whatever gunman had been aiming at me.

We were standing in the remains of an old building, only its thick brick chimney standing, while rubble surrounded us. I was sure I would've remembered a building getting destroyed in the last couple minutes, but now I wasn't so sure. Had this house always been this way, or was I only now noticing all the destruction the riot had caused?

"Where were you earlier?" I asked, trying not to sound too accusing, because I could've used his help.

"Disarming them," He said, pointing to several Cheka standing around, staring at their empty hands in bewilderment, then to others, who were on the ground, unconscious. "Too many for you to fight alone, yes? I promise, I did not kill them."

"It's fine," I said, deciding to drop the point. With all the chaos, it wouldn't have been hard not to see Pietro running around. I mean, I couldn't see him at all when he was going super-fast, so I guess that was the point. "Thanks, by the way. Is Wanda all right?"

"She is handling herself," he said, just as an explosion to the right sounded off. We swiveled our heads in unison, watching as a burst of energy sent half a dozen Cheka flying into the air, while the metal doors of the gate started to bend. Another soldier turned his gun on his comrades, who cried out in terror before being shot. The dust cleared slightly, and there stood Wanda, her eyes alight and hands raised, conducting an invisible choir as she sowed destruction around her.

"Good," I placed a hand on Pietro's shoulder, squeezing it slightly. He looked to me as I said, "Keep an eye on her. I'll take care of the snipers."

He gave me a brief nod, and a second later my hand was hovering in thin air, the silky silver residue slipping through my fingers. My eyes refocused as Pietro appeared next to Wanda in the distance, taking out a Cheka soldier coming up behind her with a swift punch.

"Need a plan, need a plan," I said, turning my attention back to the square, and the snipers that needed taking care of. I spotted flashes of light that corresponded with various gunshots, but before I could pinpoint each location, I noticed movement out of the corner of my eye.

My eyes flicked down, to a building directly to my left, across the street. There, low on the ground, was a man and a woman hunkered down behind the corner of the shop, mere feet away from the fighting, armed with — no less — a camera and a tape recorder.

I blinked several times and shook my head. Was I having a stroke? Was I really seeing this?

But they were still there when I looked again. Yes, a couple that looked to be in their mid-twenties, snapping photos of the riot taking place right in front of them, no care for the bullets and explosions that they had no defense for.
They didn't look like participants, didn't have any weapons, nor were they trying to run away. No, it almost looked like they were trying to get closer, to get a better shot.

"Hey!" I called out, running over to them, raising the shield over my head for protection. I came to a skidding stop when I reached the corner, coming down to a crouch next to them. "What're you doing? Get out of here!

"We can't!" The man said, flinching as a bullet snapped off a chunk of brick overhead. I raised the shield a little higher to cover us as he continued, "We can't leave now! It's too important!"

"What?" I demanded, utterly nonplussed. He was speaking Sokovian like I was, but his accent was off. Was he...was he a foreigner? I didn't think there were any in Sokovia left.

"We're reporters! This is our job!" The woman called back, having to raise her voice over a peal of gunfire. She had the recorder in hand, and spoke into it in carefully enunciated words: "We've just been confronted by a young female Sokovian, who appears to be one of the rebels —"

"I'm not a rebel!" I snapped, although I wasn't sure why that offended me, because it was clearly true.

And there was another thing. She spoke in the same accented Sokovian as her partner. I still couldn't figure out what it was, but now I didn't care. "Look, never mind! You guys need to get out of here before it gets any worse! It's not safe for you!"

I couldn't believe that I, a teenager, was lecturing two adults at least a decade my senior. Apparently, the man thought this was pretty ridiculous as well, because he only laughed, pushing his smudged, smoke-covered glasses further up his nose. "Trust me, it's not safe for us anywhere! Not in Sokovia!"

And that's when it hit me. I squinted at them, lowering my head as I blurted, "Are you English?"

It came out as English, too, although that was my shock kicking in, rather than any deliberate intention. Just the same, because the two gave me equal looks of astonishment.

In English, the man exclaimed, "You're American?!"

"What the bloody hell is an American child doing in Sokovia?" The woman added before I could even confirm one way or another. I suppose I regretted letting the truth slip out, but I guess if anyone had to know, it would be the ones who also weren't supposed to be here. "Good grief, how did you even get here?"

"I could be asking you the same question!" I retorted.

"We're foreign correspondents from London," The man replied, pressing his back against the wall as he searched for something inside his coat. They were both dressed in dowdy clothes — aside from their accent, they would fit right in with the typical Sokovian populace. He pulled out a badge, showed it to me, "Frank Crain and Julia Frink, with the BBC. Although, technically, we're not supposed to be here."

"The world's been dying to know what's really happening inside Sokovia's borders," Julia replied, tucking a lock of dark hair behind her ear as she held the recorder between us, not forgetting her duties, even for a moment. "So, we volunteered. British government and some Sokovian rebels helped sneak us in, but we've lost all contact. We have to remain in the dark until extraction, but that's six months from now, and I don't think we can last that long."

"I don't know how the Cheka got wind of us," Frank Crain shrugged. "Maybe they're suspicious of
any and all newcomers. But we've been here for less than a year and already things are getting too hot. And the worst thing is that no one outside even knows about it. We're all alone here."

"We've been following the rebels because no one else would protect us," Julia added. "But with their constant provocations, it's just putting us in more danger. We've got all the information we need, it's just a matter of surviving long enough to tell it."

"So, tell us," Frank said. "What's your name? What happened to you? How did you get here?"

"Look, it's a long story," I said, hunkering down next to them, really not in the mood to go over my life story. "But the short version is that I was kidnapped and now I'm here, trying to get out. The Cheka know I'm here — well, they know spies are here, and I really don't want to get caught. I didn't realize they might be after someone else."

"You were kidnapped?" Frank asked, his eyebrows shooting up. "By who?"

"The Chairman."

"The Chairman?" The two exchanged serious looks, apparently understanding the gravity of the situation. "Why?"

"I-I don't know," I lied, deciding not to get into semantics at this moment. I just raised my hand, waving the thought away, "The point is, I'm trying to go home. And that's not going to happen if those gates stay closed. I'm escaping with some friends of mine. Are you staying here?"

"Hell no," Frank snorted, peeking around the corner to snap another picture. "Like you said, the Cheka are looking for us. We'd help you get home, of course, but right now our chances aren't looking so good."

"Who're your friends, by the way?" Julia asked, raising the recorder to me.

I glanced past the building, towards the flashes of silver and red light. Pietro and Wanda were putting up a hell of a fight, trying to break down the gates, but I wasn't sure how much longer they could last without me. "They're Sokovians, and they want out, too. I can't tell you their names, I don't want them to get hurt, but I trust them. I trust them with my life. And they're gonna help me get home. That's all I want."

The two nodded like this made total sense. Julia pulled her arm back, saying, "Well, you may not realize this, but you've been caught in the middle of what appears to be the start of a revolution. This is history in the making. Whatever happens next will change the future of Sokovia forever."

"Thanks for the warning," I said, a little wry, getting ready to stand up.

But Frank grabbed my arm, and I paused to hear him say, "Wait, you're going back to fighting? How even old are you?"

I stared at him for a long moment before I answered. "Fifteen."

It felt strange saying it. But right, too. I wasn't a little kid anymore.

Frank gaped at me, releasing me in surprise; Julia's hand flew to her mouth, but I didn't hang around to see their next reaction. Instead, I shot to my feet, pointed a finger at them, and ordered, "Just stay back, okay? Until I say it's safe to go. I'm getting us all out of here."

Maybe I was jinxing it, making such a bold statement, but I didn't come this far just to be pushed
back now. Turning around, I faced the square, and all its turmoil.

The sniper was still on the roof, picking off rioters while fending off return fire from the inside of storefronts. I counted at least three Cheka shooters, working as a team, spaced out along the square.

I saw a flash of light in the corner of my eye and raised the shield just in time, ducking as a bullet whipped past me. It hit the corner of the shield, snapping it right off and nearly taking out my eye. I gasped, dropped down behind my former hiding place behind a collapsed wall. Glancing behind me, I saw the two British reporters had done what I said and remained in place — but were now deliberately following me with their camera and their eyes.

Oh, good. I had an audience.

Trying not to let it get to me, and hoping I didn't have the misfortune of having my death recorded for all eternity, I got back up and faced the building which Frank and Julia hid behind. Taking a deep breath, I dropped the shield, and ran.

I've never scaled a building before, but the know-how came to me nonetheless, just as the initial idea had. How did I know I could scale buildings now? The same way I knew how to speak Sokovian, how I knew to fight and take down enemies who should've been far superior to me.

I grabbed the drainage pipe sticking out of the brick and used it to heave myself upwards, kind of like the rope-climbing lessons in gym class, which I always had a note to sit-out for. So maybe, it was nothing like rope-climbing, because I'd never done that before, but I'd seen it enough times to know that I definitely beat Douglass' record for the Thirty-Foot Vertical Dash. Two-point-four seconds. Eat your heart out, Flash.

The drainage pipe turned horizontal, bending under a window, which I latched onto. With nothing but my upper body strength, I pushed myself up, snapping my arms out and grabbing the upper lintel of the window, before continuing my climb up along the side.

A second later, I hauled myself up over the upper wall, and dropped down onto the roof. Right in front of me was the first sniper, and he hadn't noticed my arrival.

Keeping to a crouch, I came up right behind him — and in a move I didn't know I could do until now, caught him in a half-nelson, locking my arms around his head, and squeezed the sides of his neck until he passed out.

He struggled only for a few seconds, and I dropped him carefully beside his fallen weapon. The take-down hadn't made a single sound.

Picking up the gun, I ducked down again before any of the other snipers could notice my handiwork. Looking down, I hesitated for a moment before I twisted the barrel into a pretzel; I wasn't sure how easy it would be to bend the metal, but it yielded to my grip like it was made of rubber. Without a second thought, I tossed it over the back end of the building, where no doubt Julia and Frank would notice.

They'd probably take a picture of that, too. Would they know it was me?

I pressed myself against the far wall, where they wouldn't see me, and tried not to dwell on how easy that had been, how I'd known to make it quick and silent. Why did I feel more like an assassin than a soldier?

I eased myself with the knowledge that the sniper wasn't actually dead, before vaulting over the roof and landing onto the next.
It was a careful venture across the rooftops, keeping low and making sure I wasn't seen. I knew to keep my head down, to stay on the balls of my feet, to measure my breathing and check the amount of noise I was making as I crossed the rooftops. There could be more enemies beneath me, and I didn't want to let them on what I was up to.

The other two snipers hadn't seen me, nor had anyone else noticed the disappearance of the first sniper.

The second one was hunkered down in the attic of a building on the back end of the square, directly opposite of the gates. I had to sneak in through a door on the rooftop, which was entirely devoid of cover. Luckily, no one shot at me, and I managed to get one up on the second shooter as I had with the first one. Still keeping as low as ever, I came up from behind, and with a mighty heave, I grabbed the back of his coat and threw him over the edge of the roof.

The man let out a cry of surprise before hitting the ground below. The rifle soon followed with a loud clatter, pretzeled as the last one.

Two down, one to go.

The third and final sniper was on a roof opposite of that to the first one. Together, all three created good closure of the square. No one escaped their notice, no one escaped alive. Julia and Frank may have been one of a dozen bodies now littering the ground, had they not been taken care of.

I spoke too soon.

It took me less than a minute to reach him, and maybe I should've been more careful. I got overconfident in the idea that no one else could shoot me, that they couldn't see me, that I hadn't considered if they already had.

The third sniper was crouched down, taking potshots at someone down below. I was just about to grab him about the shoulders when the gun whipped around, striking me across the head, and knocking me back.

He didn't knock me down, however, which probably would've been the end of me. I was also too close for him to shoot with his too-large gun, and although dazed, I hadn't lost all senses when he swung his gun again, this time aiming the stock at my chest.

I brought up my left arm again, deflecting the blow off of my forearm. It should've hurt, with the amount of force used, but instead I only felt numbness in that arm.

I noticed it, but it wasn't distracting enough for me to finish him off. The man shrugged the strap off his shoulders and threw the gun aside to better take me on, lunging forward and pulling out a combat knife from his belt. He let out a grunt, teeth bared, swiping at me with that silver, sharp metal.

I dodged, bending backwards, as the blade swept past my face — once, twice — I angled away each time, then brought my hands, grabbed the offending arm. I twisted it, forced it further back away from me, shoving my weight back into the soldier.

At the same time, I brought my knee to his groin, and felt the audible sound as the wind was knocked out him.

It was quickly followed by a loud pop as I dislocated his arm, and he choked, dropping the knife. He fell to his knees, one arm limp at his side. I released him, taking a step back, putting my weight into one foot and delivering a roundhouse kick to his face.
The man keeled over, done for.

I stood over him, panting a little, and I finally started feeling the aching in my arm from taking the blow from the gun. Rolling my shoulders, I grabbed the fallen rifle and disassembled it, deciding not to bother with asking myself how I knew to do that, either. It was all just par for the course now. Why wouldn't I know how to disassemble a gun?

I was "Soldatka," after all.

**BOOM.**

A massive explosion shook the very building I stood on. I stumbled slightly as I rushed over to the edge of the roof, just in time to see the metal doors of the gate come crashing down, red sparks flying. The guard towers on either side swayed dangerously, brick and mortar crumbling, and it all came tumbling down.

And a single girl stood in front of it all, dark hair whipping in the wind, her arms raised with bright, twisting energy.

Wanda finally destroyed the gates.

Breathless, with a relieved smile on my face, I didn't hesitate before lifting myself up and over the edge of the roof, dropping down over twenty feet to land in a tumble on the street.

My bones were stronger, too, if I could take a fall like that and barely feel it.

Pietro and Wanda were waiting for me in the middle of the square as I ran over, nearly tripping over some rubble in my haste. "You did it! You got it open!"

Wanda smiled, looking utterly relieved, wiping a hand across her forehead and leaving a trail of dirt behind. "Ha, yes, thank you. It seems the Cheka have retreated finally."

"The rebels surprised them," Pietro surmised, gesturing to the gathering men and women still standing, all in the square. "They did not expect so many of them to be here, or to be so prepared. It's illegal for a Sokovian civilian to own a gun."

They were in worse shape than use, only human and armed with actual weapons. But they had smiles on their faces, were shaking hands and patting backs. This was a victory for them.

I glanced over, found Julia and Frank standing by their hiding place, looking awed and covered in dust. The sun was starting to filter through the sky above, shining golden light on the square. People raised their hands over their eyes to see through it and the clouds of smoke and dust that still permeated the square.

To Pietro, I said, "Well, I don't think they were expecting us, either. We must've taken out a good chunk of them."

"Yes, but I think we should —" Wanda began, but she was interrupted by a low rumble, that steadily rose in volume. She stopped, surprised, and we all looked around, trying to find the source of it, where it was coming from.

Soon it was so loud that it shook the ground, and I realized it was coming from the gates. No, beyond them.

Hulking metal forms appeared from beyond the dust outside the gates, green and gray. They creaked
and groaned, long cannons swiveling in our direction, the bobbing heads of marching soldiers beneath them.

The smiles dropped off of our faces. My heart leapt into my throat, and I grabbed both twins as I stumbled back, pulling them away from the line of fire.

At the same time, a rebel shouted behind us, "It's the Cheka!"

It was indeed. It seemed the Cheka were truly devoted to their cause, having no intention of letting anyone escape. They must have realized they were losing the battle in the square, and called reinforcements.

This time, they brought tanks.
"Holy shit!" I gasped as the first tank fired off, sending a shell into the building directly behind us. The upper floor was decimated instantly — brick, mortar, brown dust ricocheting like powdery fireworks, hailing down over our heads. Chunks as big as dinner tables came crashing down at our feet. One missed Pietro by inches, had he not been fast enough to get out of the way.

The rebels scattered, incoherent shouting filling the air again. Gunfire resumed, and when I looked around again, I saw men marching out of the dust beyond the gates, accompanying the tanks. Foot soldiers with their own rifles, using the tanks as cover as they fired shots into the shifting crowd. Men fell. The first tank fired off again, then the second tank behind that followed suit.

We ran for cover as the Cheka rolled in on their massive machines, that low rumble rising to a near deafening roar. Pietro, Wanda and I ducked into a hollow storefront, its windows blasted out, door entirely gone. We hunkered down beneath one of those windows, shattered glass at our feet, keeping our heads down and praying no one shot at us. This building wouldn't do much to protect us, but at least it hid us from sight.

My ears still rang from the deafening booms of the tanks' cannons, so I almost didn't hear when Wanda shouted, covering her ears: "What do we do? We're outnumbered!"

She was right. I peered through the broken windows into the square again. Aside from the tanks, there were at least forty soldiers on the ground, far more of them than there were left of the rebels. Even if we had the upper hand, we didn't stand a chance against the machinery.

The first tank had stopped right in the center, the second one right behind, and I spotted two more pulling up the rear, just outside the gate. God damn, four tanks? Talk about overkill. Were they going to destroy the whole city with those things?

Least to say, I did not like our chances.

"We could run," Pietro said, as another building in the distance exploded, flames so hot that I could feel them, even from here. His eyes were wide, watching the rampant destruction with growing
terror. "The gates are still open. We could slip through. They would not be fast enough to catch us."

"No!" Wanda protested, grabbing his sleeve and giving him a desperate look. "We cannot leave the city like this! They are completely defenseless!"

"And what? Should we die for them?" Pietro snapped at her, throwing out his hands. "We fight men, Wanda, we have never faced anything such as that! I am fast, but I cannot fight a tank!"

Wanda turned her eyes to me, pleading, "Amelia, please! We cannot leave yet. We must do something!"

"No, we must leave now!" Pietro argued.

"J-just hold on a second," I said, wincing as another earth-shattering boom fell across us. Dust rained from the ceiling and I covered my head. "I think Wanda is right, Pietro. It'd be wrong if we left now. But…I'll handle the tanks, okay? It, er, it shouldn't be too hard to take care of them. You two help the rebels; there's already more Cheka soldiers out there than they can handle."

"You are certain?" Wanda's eyebrows pinched together. "You can do it?"

"I can sure as hell try." I said, offering a hopeful smile. I didn't know if I could encourage them, but I did my best. "If we don't do this, no one else will."

Pietro scowled, looking uncertain for a moment, frustrated that it was two-against-one, but eventually he nodded his head, determined. "I will watch your backs. Both of you. Be careful."

I nodded once before standing. "Let's do this."

Stepping out of that building, out of our safe spot, was like walking straight into hell. In the few moments we had been covered, the entire square had changed almost completely. Nearly all the buildings in the vicinity had been damaged or destroyed. Rubble littered the streets. There was fire everywhere. Piles of tires where the rebels had made impromptu roadblocks — they created a terrible stench and a thick screen of clogging smoke that made it impossible to see through. At the very least, it seemed to hinder the tanks, but they didn't stop moving in, and there were just so many Cheka running around, pushing the rebels back.

I didn't see those foreign correspondents anywhere. I checked their last hiding spot, only to find it empty. Perhaps they wised up and got the hell out of Dodge.

Well, it was one less thing to worry about.

Tightening my grip on the shield, I turned and faced the tanks.

Behind me, the twins darted out, Pietro going forward and clearing a way for Wanda to whip out her Magic. Three Cheka went down at once — a shout rang out, and they were alerted to our presence. A burst of gunfire exploded in the air, and I took off into a run.

I yelped as bullets exploded at my feet, spurring me to only run faster before dodging around the tank. A soldier was on the other side, turning to me in surprise, but only had the chance to let out a shout before I slammed my fist into his jaw and knocked him to the ground.

The soldier behind him whipped around, gun raised, but it was knocked aside by my foot as I leapt up onto the tank. On top in a second, I kicked him again, heel to his nose; his head snapped back and he fell backwards into the next man behind them, and both went down in a heap.
I had no idea how to stop a tank, just knew that I probably could, being a Super Soldier. My abilities had to count for something, right? These things weren't unstoppable. They were actually quite old, 70's era vehicles that were never designed for the likes of me or the twins. On top, I was in the middle of deciding what to do — mistakenly catching myself in a moment of indecision, something I had decided not to do earlier — when I saw something move in the corner of my vision.

I looked up, just in time to see Tank #2 level its cannon at Tank #1 — at me.

In that split second, between visual recognition and cognitive understanding, I thought I could see the glint of the shell inside the cannon's barrel —

Then diving off Tank #1, right before exploded underneath me. I felt the wave of heat, starting at my feet and washing up over my head, so crippling I couldn't feel the cold air for the next minute. I hit the ground hard, a haphazard roll, head over heels. It almost hurt me as bad as the explosion did, but at least I was still in one piece.

I came to a stop on my stomach, bringing the shield over my head as burning metal rained down. They clattered and bounced across the street, smoking and smoldering, leaving ash trails in their wake.

And then I was up on my feet again, without even looking to see if it was safe yet. I didn't have the time. I had to keep moving.

I could see how Pietro through, in his way of fighting. When getting from one point to another as fast as possible, Pietro usually just ran in straight, direct lines — something I knew thanks to him saving me those few times. But in a fight, he acted differently. I could see it here; darting back and form, leaving a zig-zagging glimmering ribbon in his wake.

It reminded me of a rabbit, and how it behaved to avoid predators; essentially being so random and quick in its path, literally turning on a dime, so that it was impossible to track, to predict where it will be next, and thus frustrating any marksman worth his salt.

Pietro was basically invisible to the tanks, who took far too long to adjust aim to ever catch him.

So, I tried to be like Pietro, in dealing with these big-ass tanks. While I would never be as fast as Pietro, I copied his pattern, quickly getting my way around Tank #2. Along the way, I picked up one of the fallen chunks of metal left of Tank #1. It was still hot, almost too hot to hold, but I did anyways.

One of the Cheka footmen had run up to replace the men lost. He took aim at me as I came his way, stumbling slightly when I didn't slow down. I dodged his opening shot, dropping back to one knee with one leg out, as though I were sliding to home base — slamming the hunk of metal into the wheels inside the tank's tracks — at the same time, swiping my shield on my right, taking out the footman's knees as I slid past him.

He cried out, and I got up as he fell down. Turning, I delivered a well-placed kick to the back of his head. A piercing shriek filled the air; the shard of metal tearing through the tracks, the tank's gears grinding. The entire vehicle veered left as its steering was compromised.

I wasn't done yet. Clambering on top of Tank #2, I kept on an eye on the tank directly behind it as I got on top, working fast as I grabbed the ceiling hatch and — with one good yank — broke it open. Super strength certainly had its advantages.

Tossing the useless metal aside, I was already waiting for the bayonets to come shooting out, ready
to pierce me. But I leaned back, and instead grabbed them, too, and easily yanked them out of the grips of the soldiers within the tank. Tossed the guns, aside, too. Then grabbed the shirts of the soldiers as they came out next, throwing them out one by one, until it was empty.

The last Chekist, however, had something in his hand when I took him out. I only noticed it at the last second, as I dropped him outside, and he let it go.

It bounced across the top of the tank, at my knees. I looked down.

A grenade.

"Shit!" I yelped, kicking it on instinct before stumbling backwards — only there was nothing behind me, and I fell. Flat on my back, in the dirt, next to the tank, as the grenade tumbled inside the hatch.

FWOOM.

I squeezed my eyes shut, curling up under my shield, still on my back, as smoke and fire billowed out of Tank #2, like a perverse chimney.

I let out a sigh of relief. At least it didn't explode this time.

The Cheka I had thrown out were already running away, trying to grab their lost weapons — but never reached them. I had just gotten up when a sudden tornado hit, whipping my coat around me and sending dust up in the air. I brought my arms up, covering my eyes, until it passed.

"You're welcome!" Pietro called, when I could see again. The escaped Cheka had been knocked out, still falling to the ground, while their weapons had mysteriously disappeared.

"Thanks!" I said belatedly, before turning on my heel towards the gates.

Tank #2 was essentially rendered useless, and was now acting as a roadblock to the last two, who did not have enough space through the gate to pass. I slipped past Tank #2 just as the last of the Cheka infantry ran forward.

At that, I backpedaled, ducking behind Tank #2 just before a volley of fire could catch me. I took the other way around, flanking them, coming to a stop just at the back of Tank #2 and peering over to see them spreading out, some going forward where I once was, others fanning out in my direction. I had exactly two seconds before they were on me.

Next to me, an unconscious Chekist lay. On his belt were three fresh hand grenades.

Well, it worked before, didn't it?

When the Cheka came around on me, I was already standing, arm over my head, grenade launching from my hand.

The Cheka saw this, and instantly knew what I was doing. Their eyes went wide and they skidded back, flinching, turning their heads and bringing up their weapons as if to shield themselves.

But the grenade wasn't aimed at them. I wouldn't be so stupid. They were so close that if the grenade was for them, I'd just blow myself up, too.

No. It arced over their heads. My aim was careful, precise.

It went up, and slipped into the barrel of cannon #3.
There was a rattling sound as it rolled down the entire length of the barrel. A brief, muffled shout from inside the tank. Then —

**BOOM.**

The cannon practically tore itself off the tank. The metal was too sturdy to be broken by the tiny grenade alone. It did, however, react with the shell in an exciting manner — about midway along the cannon it bubbled out, like a giant tumor, while the exhaust of the explosion ricocheted out the end of the cannon, bursting the end of it like flower petals. Ugly, metal flower petals.

I stared at it for a second, almost surprised. I couldn't believe that worked.

The effect I had on the *Cheka* soldiers was over the instant they looked around and noticed that Tank #3 was out of commission. They seemed relieved they weren't dead, then angry at me in short order. I barely had the time to remember myself and charge past them before they could get their guns up again.

I went right for them, slamming my shoulder into one and rushing another with my shield. Both were knocked down, and the third's hands shook on his gun. It fired, and I cried out as a sharp pain ripped across my right arm, just above the shield.

I didn't look down to examine the wound — I could already feel blood running down my arm. But it could still move, I could still lift the shield without too much protest. It actually didn't hurt much, past the initial blow.

Maybe it was the shock, or the adrenaline, that kept me from feeling the pain. It might just be a flesh wound. Or maybe it was so bad that my nerve endings had been destroyed.

But I didn't have time to worry about that. Once the fight was over, I could take care of my wounds.

The third *Chekist* didn't have time to reload his gun.

I went at him, grabbing the muzzle of the gun with my left hand my good arm. It was hot, burned my hand, but I didn't let go, just wrenched it out of the way as I brought up my shield arm, and jabbed its top edge into the *Chekist's* face. Blood spurted from his nose, and he dropped, leaving the rifle in my hand.

I spun it around so I was holding the much less-hot forestock. I glanced down at it, wondering for a brief moment why I didn't just use this instead of the shield. It would be faster. I knew without knowing how that I could fire and reload this gun faster than anyone here. I could take out more men in one minute with this rifle than I could with the shield, at any other time.

But knowing how to shoot is one thing. Choosing to pull the trigger is different when its aimed at a person.

Even against forces like these.

I dropped the gun, and faced the last tank.

Its cannon hadn't even raised yet. I was outside the gates now, and I was mildly surprised by the sudden thickness of the forest just outside the walls. It was like civilization just ended, but the road the tanks were on stretched on, into the mountains. There would be towns and villages out there. A military base, too, nearby. Where these tanks and men would have come from. My eyes drew up to the gray sky, filling up with the smoke from the riots, the destruction. I wonder what all of this looked like, up there. To have a bird's eye view. To see everything, and know what to do.
It occurred to me that if these guys could bring out tanks, they could probably call on helicopters, and those would be a lot harder to fight. I was a super soldier, not a Valkyrie, and there wasn't enough gun training or shield smashing in the world for me to be able to take a bird down.

So, it was time to get this over with before they showed up.

My eyes dropped down. Right, Tank #4.

They hadn't fired yet. They couldn't, I suppose. They were twenty feet outside the gate, and couldn't get in thanks to the now two tanks in their way. I suppose they could just push past. It was still crawling forward, as if confused with the recent turn of events. Maybe they hadn't seen me yet.

Rolling my shoulders, I prepared myself for one last go of this. I'd never taken down a tank before. Now I had three under my belt. This was definitely a way to set a record.

Let's make it four.

I dropped down to a crouch, taking care to keep out of sight as I rounded on the last tank. I wasn't entirely certain on their field of sight, but I knew I hadn't been seen when I came around the right side with no response. As silently as I could, I climbed up to the top.

And, after a moment of consideration, I knocked on the hatch.

Tonk, tonk, tonk.

A moment passed.

Click.

"Hello?" The Chekist soldier asked, as he popped out of the hatch door. When he saw my, sitting on the edge of the tank, he did a double-take.

"Hey, there, how's it going?" I smiled, giving him a quick wave, before punching him in the face.

His eyes rolled back, and he dropped down, unconscious.

Leaning over, I said, "I have a grenade! If you don't want me to drop it in, surrender now!"

Instantly, two pairs of hands shot out over the top. "We surrender! We surrender! Don't drop it!"

Without further ado, I wrenched both of them out of the tank. The men stared at me in fear, before realizing that with both of my hands occupied with holding them, that there was nowhere to keep the grenade — that I never had one to begin with. Their looks of terror turned to surprise, then embarrassed betrayal.

I just grinned at them. "Glad we could work things out," before throwing them overboard.

I peered inside, grabbed the collar of the dazed Cheka still inside, and pulled him out, tossing him on top of the other two Cheka, still scrambling up. Then I took two actual grenades — the last from the ones I took off the unconscious Cheka, pulled their pins, and dropped both into the hatch before leaping off the machine, and joining the others in running away.

The grenades exploded and, finally, the last tank was finished.

The remaining three Cheka stared at the fallen tanks, before looking to me in a combination of fear and disbelief. I stood there, glanced at them, and said, "Guess you should've brought more tanks."
"Y-you're not going to kill us?" One of them asked, stammering.

"Not really my style," I said, shrugging, then hooked a thumb over my shoulder. "Besides, you surrendered. But if you ever thought of a vacation, I think now's a great time to take one."

The three shared a look, as if considering how seriously they considered their loyalty to the Chairman, before looking back at me. Then, together, they took off. I watched them go, before turning back to the gates, and ran back through.

On the other side, I was pleased to see that the fighting was going well for the rebels. I was fast, climbing up on top of Tank #2, raising my shield over my head, and shouted as loud as I could, "Tanks are gone! They've surrendered! You're free! Go!"

I was met with a resounding chorus of cheers. The remaining Cheka soldiers swiveled around in shock, which was a mistake. Like dominos, they dropped, as Pietro swiped past, knocking each one out. Wanda, in the process of lifting massive chunks of rubble in the air, dropped in front of the feet of the surrendering Cheka, who dropped to their knees in relief. The rebels ran forward, jumping and cheering, disarming the Cheka, while others turned and ran back into the city, ready to share the good news.

Jumping down off the tank, I reconvened with the twins, who were alight with grins again. Pietro clapped me on the shoulder, said, "Impressive! I did not think you could actually do it! Once more, you prove me wrong."

"Thanks," I said, although it was a little half-hearted. "That vote of confidence really inspires me."

Wanda, however, stared at me. "Amelia, your arm!"

"Oh, right," I said, looking at it for the first time. Blood was splattered across the sleeve of the raincoat, and I could feel it congealing against my skin, sticky and warm. I had completely forgotten about it until she pointed it out, and felt a sharp, stabbing pain as soon as I recognized it again. "It's, uh, it's not too bad. I think."

"Here, let me help," Wanda said, shrugging off her scarf and tearing off a strip from the end. I almost tried to stop her from helping, but there was a light in her eye that said she'd use magic if it meant my arm would be fixed, so I decided not to complain.

Instead, I asked, "Everything go well with you? Looks like you had to deal with more guys than I realized."

"All is well on my part," she said, pointing down the street before returning to tie the strip around my arm. "I cleared the way so citizens can escape. The Cheka brought extra vehicles and men in from downtown, but I took care of them. It was very easy."

"No Komitet, no Vulkan," Pietro informed, his smile wavering a little. He scratched the back of his head, as the crowd in the square grew, people rushing past us to filter out of the city. We pulled in closer to hear each other. "I do not know where they are, or where they have gone. Why they did not come here. Do you think they have decided to ignore us?"

"Pfft, no way," Wanda shook her head, sneering. "They hate us. We embarrassed them by escaping — twice. They will not forget us anytime soon."

"I think she's right. If they're not here, then they're nearby," I said. "Waiting, I guess. For what, I don't know. But we should get out now, before the Cheka reorganize. They probably have more tanks, helicopters, and we've already handled all we could today. They'll wear us out with sheer
numbers. We still got that train, right?"

"Yes," Pietro nodded, then pointed down the road. "It is off the path. Supply train for the Chairman. But we can reach it tonight, before it leaves the station. It will take us three hours, if we do not stop, and I do not go fast."

"Can you?" I asked.

Pietro opened his mouth, then closed it again, hunching over a little. Even Wanda noticed he seemed out of breath, and put a hand on his shoulder. "No, probably not. I need food, rest, first, before I can run like that again. Especially carrying either of you."

"That's fine, we planned for this. Hopefully there will be food along the way." I said, and stepped back, making to turn around.

"Wait!" A voice called out, making us pause and turn around. From the crowd emerged two adults, a man and a woman. The reporters. Frank and Julia.

The twins drew together immediately at their approach, expressions suddenly guarded, but I cut between them. "It's okay, guys, they're on our side."

"That was incredible!" Julia exclaimed, holding out her arms, almost as if she intended to hug me. Both of their faces were lit up with smiles, bewildered and awed. "What you did — all three of you! I've never seen anything like it before."

"We've been through a lot," Frank added. His camera was in his hand, looking a little dinged up but otherwise still operational. I wondered how much he captured of the fight. "But we've never met anyone with…with powers before. Are you — are you Mutants?"

"It's like 1973 all over again," Julia said.

"What? No," I held up my hands to stop them before they could run away with that idea. Were the twins Mutants? Probably. But that was perhaps too controversial a topic to be talking about right now, and if these guys were as dedicated to their job as I thought, I didn't need them telling the whole world that Sokovia's uprising was due to angry Mutants. The last time Mutants were this upfront about politics, one tried to assassinate Nixon. Lying was better than nothing right now, at least for who were essentially complete strangers. "They're Sokovians, just like everyone else here. All of this is just to get out of here."

"And if we were," Pietro said behind me. "If we were Mutants, so what?"

Frank and Julia shared a look, one I couldn't read, before turning back to Pietro. Julia said, "Well, I guess I don't really know. Some people still think you're too dangerous. But Frank and I will do our best to be unbiased. There's a good chance you'll be seen freedom fighters. As…heroes, even. Like the Mutant woman who saved Nixon from that radical."

I glanced over my shoulder and saw the looks on the twins' faces, and could tell they had no idea what Frank and Julia were talking about. "Well, that's a history lesson for later. Right now, we need to go. Thanks, for everything, I guess. I hope you get this story out safely."

"Oh, we will," Frank nodded enthusiastically. "The whole world will know about Sokovia by the end of the week, I promise you."

I sensed Wanda and Pietro shifting behind me, straightening at the news. "Really?" Wanda asked, sounding elated. She clasped her hands together, a ghost of a smile on her face. "They will hear
about us? The UN? Will they help us?"

"Not sure, but it's a good start," Julia said, then gazed down the road, in which Novi Grad citizens were all walking on, rushing out. Cars were coming out of the streets now, people high-tailing it with everything they could carry. "If you're leaving now, you can come with us. The BBC would just about die to interview actual participants. Have real, first-hand accounts, on live television. We could take you there, get you home safely."

It was a tempting thought. Britain was practically the closest thing to America I was going to get for a while. At least they spoke English there. But with Pietro and Wanda with me, I knew it wasn't going to happen. It was too dangerous.

"We can't," I said, my shoulders deflating a little. "We're, um, we're not exactly low-profile targets. There are other people after us, agents of the Chairman. Traveling together will just make us slower, easier to catch, and I know they won't hesitate to kill you if you get in their way. You'll be safer, faster without us."

Frank and Julia seemed disappointed by this, but nodded in understanding. Frank said, "Well, I suppose that makes sense. You three seem to be the only ones with powers here, so I can only imagine what the Chairman would want with you. I hope you kids know what you're doing."

"Way too young to be freedom fighters," Julia agreed, reaching out to pat me on the arm, then jolt when she noticed my bleeding arm. "Oh! Well, just be careful out there. Maybe we'll see each other again someday."

Wanda was already starting to turn, walk away, Pietro at her heel. They beckoned me to follow, and I gave one last wave to the correspondents before joining them.

"Maybe."

✮✮✮

"Nixon," Pietro said out of the blue, a few hours later. "He was one of your presidents, right?"

"Infamously," I replied, throwing him a strange look as we peered down over the edge of the building. "Why?"

The three of us were crouched on top of the train station, watching the Cheka working beneath us, streaming back and forth like ants as they loaded and unloaded the boxcars beneath us. There was no town here, the train station being a small complex in what was essentially the middle of nowhere. Our getting here was covered by trees and snow, and we literally came across no one else in that snowy trek. It was almost ridiculous. I'd gotten so used to Novi Grad that I never considered that the rest of Sokovia wouldn't be so urbanized.

I had dumped the shield back in Novi Grad, deciding it faster to travel without it. The thing was so busted up anyways that it wouldn't have lasted for much longer, and it was annoying having to keep holding it one hand. The hasty bandage Wanda made was tight enough to impede me, or at least impossible to ignore. It made my fingers tingle and pulse, but at least it kept me from reopening the wound.

We made it to the train station in one piece. Trekking through woods and snow was the fastest way
there, avoiding roads so we wouldn't be easily spotted, and hoping the trees would provide us enough cover in case any reinforcements came from above. It seemed to have worked.

Pietro seemed distracted, however, and I couldn't tell if he was still worried about the lack of Komitet (which I was still thinking about), or something else entirely. When something goes this well, I guess your mind tends to wander.

"I was thinking about what those reporters said to us," Pietro replied, kneeling against the edge wall. His fingers tapped along the brick impatiently, that constant twitching that betrayed his instinct to use his powers. "What they said about Mutants. Is it true, that one of them saved your president?"

"Yeah," I replied, deciding to humor him for now. Pietro seemed legitimately bothered by this, and if I told him now, I figured it would be less of a distraction later. "It was caught live on television. The whole world was watching when it happened."

"Who was she?" he asked, a line between his brow. "What was her name?"

"I don't know. No one ever found out." I shrugged, and when he threw me a disbelieving look, I added quickly, "I'm not kidding, man. Like, she had blue skin and red hair, which would stand out in a crowd, as you'd expect, but popular theory is that she was a shapeshifter, a Mutant who could change her appearance. That's probably how she got away."

"So no one knows who she is," Pietro stated flatly, disappointed.

"No. The government calls her Mystique, though, since they don't have a name," I said with a shrug. "That's what they teach us in history class."

"Mystique," Wanda repeated on my other side. She was twisting her fingers, gazing off with a distant look on her face. "I like it. She sounds cool."

"If she's a hero, though," Pietro said, gesturing with his hand. "Then why does she hide her identity? Certainly, the Americans would not persecute her for saving their president?"

"I don't think being a hero is all it's cracked up to be," I said. Below, the Cheka were shouting, and I could see trucks rolling away with cargo. It was almost time to go. "When you're a hero, then that means you've got enemies. It's even worse if you're famous, like Mystique was. If they know you, if they know who you really are, then it's just that much easier for them to find you, to hurt you. Or your family. Being a Mutant makes it that much worse."

"Oh." Pietro was silent for a moment, dwelling on this concept. He rested his chin on his hand, eyes following the path of a Cheka below, carrying a crate of bananas in his arms. "I guess that makes sense. I would rather be safe than famous."

"I wish I could meet her," Wanda said dreamily. "She must be so brave, to stand up in front of everyone, and be unafraid of who she is. Unafraid of what the world thinks of her. I hope I can be like her someday."

"Not if I can help it," Pietro said, only half-joking.

She reached behind me to punch him in the arm. "Shut up. You cannot protect me forever, Pietro."

"I will certainly try."

Wanda just sniffed in annoyance, tossing her head, and I had to hide my laugh behind a hand so no one could overhear. "You guys are killing me. Let's go already before you guys get us caught."
That inadvertently started another argument, of the twins accusing the one another of being the problem, and a "No, you" back-and-forth took place in hushed whispers as we jumped from the building roof to the train below. The sound we made was covered by the train horn, and the subsequent chug of wheels. The boxcar beneath me shifted and rocked as we suddenly started forward. Our position was currently hidden by the building next to us, but if the train pulled out before we could get inside, then we were screwed.

"Wanda! Help please!" I hissed at her as I tried wrenching open the top hatch of the boxcar we were standing on. It was tougher than I expected and I didn't want to make a scene by ripping off, all He-Man like, and needed Wanda's far subtler magic to pull it off. I was sure that this train would face inspections along the way, and I really didn't want to tip anyone off with a giant hole in one of their boxcars.

"Sorry," Wanda whispered back, having the decency to look a little hangdog as she cut off her fight with Pietro to weave red energy around the hatch and snap it open.

I dropped down into the dark interior, landing feet first on the hardwood floor. The sound echoed, so I knew this cart was mostly empty before the twins followed me, Wanda lighting up the inside with an orb of spinning light. The hatch closed above us, and suddenly it felt very quiet, with the outside nose muffled, and the rumble of the train tracks right beneath us. We crouched on the spot, waiting as the train kept moving, picked up speed, until we were sure we were out of the train station.

"That went well," Pietro commented after a few minutes, when the all-clear was agreed upon. He stood up, took a look around, sniffing the air. "Smells like spices. I wonder what is in these boxes…"

On the far end of the car were a pile of stacked crates. We all went over to examine the contents, and Wanda let out a startling cry, making me and Pietro jump with fear, until it was revealed that she had stumbled upon was not, in fact, a ticking time bomb, dead body, or any other unpleasant surprise — but rather a crate filled with pre-packaged cookies and bread.

Pietro discovered dried goods in another crate, and I found actual jugs of water. It wasn't until seeing them, sloshing around in their crate, did I realize how thirsty I was. We hadn't stopped at any time reaching the train station to get food or drink, not even to eat the snow, so I didn't hesitate to pick one out, pop the cap, (smell it first to make sure it was actually water), before taking a long swig.

We had a good supper that night.

Aside from the eating, there wasn't much talking — probably because we were so exhausted from today's events that to do anything else besides sleep for an age seemed silly. Wanda was already leaning heavily against Pietro, and seemed to be drifting off in the middle of munching on her cookies.

I in the middle of eating my bread and water, wishing for at least a little butter, for some flavor, and trying not to think too hard about Mom's cooking, or Thanksgiving, or hamburgers or normal American food or home, when Pietro's voice broke through my thoughts.

It was almost warm in here, probably thanks to our collective body heat, and even in the dark I could see that Wanda curling up, tucking her head against Pietro. Instead of complaining, like I'd expect, he sang. Soft, musical words echoed in the wooden interior, almost ethereal in the calm, dark quiet.

"Odpoczniej moje dziecko
Dzień się skończył"
Słońce zaświeci

Gdy przyjdzie poranek

Ale teraz jest ciemno i świat jest spokojny

Więc daj odpocząć oczom swym i zaśnij…"

"What is that?" I asked eventually, my voice a low whisper.

"A lullaby," Pietro said, petting Wanda's head as she slept. There was a rhythm to it, his eyes distant and glassy, as if lost somewhere in a dream. "Dat used to sing it to us, when we were little."

"What language is it?" I tilted my head. I didn't understand the words, but it sounded sweet, kind. "It's not Sokovian."

"Polish, I think," Pietro replied. "Dat was from Poland. He said his parents used to sing him that song, when he was a boy. He told me the words once, in Sokovian, but I don't remember them now. I wish...I wish I could ask. I wish he was here."

"I thought you hated him."

Pietro shrugged, making a face. "Sometimes. What I feel is for Dat is...complicated. I will always be angry he left. But I still miss him, anyways. I wish I did not. But I do."

I was silent for a long moment. I knew what Pietro meant — I was angry at my dad, too, for similar reasons. I didn't miss him, of course — can't miss someone you never met. But I knew the feeling of wanting him back, of being angry at myself for wanting that. "What do you remember of him?"

Pietro didn't answer right away, squinting slightly as he considered the question. "Not much. His voice, sometimes. I hear it in my dreams. Other times, his face. His eyes. They were sad...always sad. I don't know why. He would never tell me. But I could see it. And I remember...I remember he had numbers. On his wrist."

I blinked, frowning. "Numbers on his wrist? What, like a tattoo?"

"Yes, yes, a tattoo. Faded."

"How old was he?" I asked, tilting my head. Tattooed numbers on his wrist...it sounded wrong. And... he was Pietro's father? Something wasn't adding up.

"I don't know. Forties, I guess. Not old. Why?" Pietro returned my frown. "Do you know what the numbers mean?"

I hesitated. "...No. Well, maybe. I don't know."

If Pietro's father was in his forties, and if that tattoo was what it sounded like, a Holocaust survivor — a concept that sent me reeling. Then I stopped myself, remembering that the Russians also had their Gulags. Whatever Pietro's father was, he had been a prisoner. Probably an innocent one. Not that I could ever know. Something Pietro wouldn't be able to tell me, either. While I considering it further, Pietro interrupted my thoughts with: "Well, it does not matter. He is gone now. Whatever, whoever he was, it is in the past."

"You sure?" I asked, raising my eyebrows in doubt. The conundrum sounded far too curious for me to let go, but I could see the resolution in Pietro's face, the utter indifference.
"For now, yes," Pietro said. "Perhaps when we come back, and if he is still alive, then I will find Dat. But until then, I will be busy trying to survive." Then he looked at me, curious. "Did your parents ever sing you lullabies?"

"Yeah," I nodded, my gaze falling to the ground. "Well, my mom did. No dad, you know. I spent a lot of nights in hospitals, and I couldn't go outside a lot, so my mom made me feel better with You Are My Sunshine. Do you know it?"

Pietro shook his head. "No. Can you sing it for me?"

"What? No way."

"You don't know the words?"

"Of course, I know the words."

"Then sing it!"

"No. I'm not singing. I don't sing."

"Neither can I. Does not stop me."

I scowled at him, and Pietro returned the look with a grin. Wanda shifted, her head shifting on his shoulder, before falling to rest again. I studied her for a second — then Pietro gave me puppy-dog-eyes, gesturing to her, and I groaned, "Okay, fine! I'll sing it, but just this once."

"Ah! Wonderful."

I hesitated, wondering if I heard sarcasm in that, before settling myself against the back wall of the car. Pietro's stare was distracting, so I closed my eyes, tried to think only of my mom, those dark nights in a gurney, with the only the hum of machines as music to Mom's singing.

"You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
You make me happy, when skies are gray
You'll never know, dear, how much I love you
Please don't take my sunshine away

The other night dear, as I lay sleeping
I dreamt I held you in my arms
When I awoke, dear, I was mistaken
So I hung my head and I cried.

I'll always love you and make you happy,
If you will only say the same.
But if you leave me and love another,
You'll regret it all some day

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
You make me happy when skies are gray
You'll never know dear, how much I love you
Please don't take my sunshine away

In all my dreams, dear, you seem to leave me
When I awake my poor heart pains
So when you come back and make me happy
I'll forgive and take all the blame

You are my sunshine, my only sunshine
You make me happy when skies are gray
You'll never know dear, how much I love you
Please don't take my sunshine away
Oh, please don't take my sunshine away."

My voice drifted off at the end, just before my voice could break, and I huddled up, hugging myself and suddenly feeling nostalgic, and very homesick. I had never sung that song before, and doing it now just made me want Mom to be here. Just made me want to be home again, wish none of this was real. My eyes burned and it took all of my willpower not to cry right then and there.

"Hmm," Pietro had a soft, dreamy smile on his face, nodding as I finished. "I liked that. Is that Beatles' song, yes? I'm glad you taught me English, to know what those words mean."

"I taught you English?" I asked, surprised. I hadn't even realized I'd been singing in English, although of course it made sense after the fact. I didn't know the song in Sokovian.

"Yes, the way we taught you our language," Pietro chuckled, his shoulders shaking a little, enough that Wanda grumbled in her sleep. "It is how we became friends, in the Crucible. How we understood each other. How we understood ourselves. Without you, we would never have escaped. We would have never seen the sun again."

"Clearly you and I remember things differently, because I haven't seen any sun since I woke up." I said, making him laugh.

"Perhaps you just make the weather shit." Pietro suggested.

I threw a piece of bread at him. "Just go to sleep, Silver Butt."

Chapter End Notes

The song Pietro sings is the same one Erik sings in X-Men: Apocalypse, which I think is the second reference here to that movie. I don’t consider it canon to this fic, but I like Magneto’s character in that movie, and consider it the personality the twins knew when they were younger.

Here are the English lyrics:
Rest now, my child
The day is over,
The sun will shine
When morning comes
But now it is dark
And the world is at peace
So let your eyes rest
And sleep

Hope you liked all the x-men references :)
Chapter Twenty

I had been dreaming of Mom, her singing voice and a warm fireplace, the smell of her chicken soup, all those small, sweet things I never realized I missed before — when I was shaken awake.

"Amelia," Pietro said, his hand on my shoulder, gently shaking me. "Amelia, get up. You must see this."

"Mm," I groaned, pushing him away, squeezing my eyes against the pale sunlight piercing my eyes. But shifting back to reality also opened me up to the chilling November cold, and there was no going back to sleep like that. My voice was thick and slurred when I mumbled, "What? What is it?"

"Come, come," Pietro urged, taking me by the arm and helping me up.

I winced at the crick in my neck — no pillows in the train car, after all. Slumping on my feet, I followed as Pietro led me to the open door. Wait, who opened it? Wanda was clinging to the side, wide awake, peering through the rushing wind into the distance. Cold, gray morning light filtered in, and I squinted out into the open; we were surrounded by massive mountains on all sides — their peaks were lost in thick, cottony clouds. It was already snowing, and the mountainsides were white and black, absolutely frozen. The train tracks led across on the side of the mountains, and the ground dropped steeply beneath us. It was a good half-mile down between us and the valley below. A winding blue river slithered its way around the base of the mountains.

Wanda pointed to something on the mountain across from us, almost a mile away. "There it is. The Crucible."

And that's when I saw it. A white stone castle, tall and austere, peering out of the fog encircling the mountain. It had blue-shingled roof and black windows, and no sign of life anywhere. It seemed lonely on its little cliff, with no surrounding town or village, no visible road leading up to it. Secluded, it seemed like the perfect getaway for the wealthy and powerful, perhaps the romantic vacation home of old Germanic royals.

Now, it was the home to the Chairman.

It seemed oddly fitting — the people of Sokovia existed in squalor, while their beloved leader lived like a king.

"Huh," I said absently, as we watched the castle slowly drift past. Was anyone there right now? It almost looked abandoned. "Looks like a Bond villain lair."

"I do not know what that is," Pietro said. "But I agree."

A headache started forming behind my eyes, and I winced, pressing the heel of my palm to my
temple. It was like this sharp, stabbing pain that took me by surprise. Either I really should've slept with a pillow, or something was wrong.

"Do you remember anything?" Wanda asked, looking up at me with pinched brows. Her dark hair billowed behind her in the wind. "We were here for many years, but we never knew what it looked like on the outside. The Chairman let you out sometimes, though. Training, I think. If anyone would recognize it, it would be you."

"I-I don't..." I grimaced, shaking my head. My vision went all squirrel-y for a moment, and I shifted unsteadily on my feet as my stomach did an unexpected flip. I suddenly felt nauseous, lightheaded — vertigo, even though I wasn't looking down. Still, it felt the world was spinning around me. "I don't think so..."

The Crucible didn't seem familiar - at first. But the longer I looked at it, the stronger the sense of *déjà vu* came over me. The same sense of *déjà vu* I had when I met the kids. No, no, I'd definitely been here before. Somehow, I had seen the outside of the Crucible, I had been outside and for some reason I hadn't escaped.

"Amelia," Wanda said, her hand suddenly gripping my shoulder. Her expression was baffled. "Your nose is bleeding."

"W-what?" I blinked at her, but Wanda's face shifted in front of me. Double-vision. I raised my hand to my face, and noted with shock that she was right. Pulling my hand away, my fingers were covered in blood. Until she said it, I hadn't noticed the trail of warmth dripping down my face.

I stared at the blood on my hands. This was far more familiar to me than the Crucible. Oh no. Was it happening again?

I didn't get the chance to find out. I looked up to meet Wanda and Pietro's eyes, their increasing worry, before my knees buckled and I collapsed.

I was out before I hit the floor.

✮✮✮

Cold.

*Mouth dry.*

*Wheeze. Rattle. Shake.*

Bright white light filtered through my eyelids. I squinted, wondering if I was back in the ambulance. But there was nothing. No movement. No sound. Nothing aside from the beeping of a machine, the rhythmic press and release of some sort of gas, and the faint creaking as I shifted on the soft mattress I was lying on, the metal cot beneath.

My chest felt heavy, too heavy on one side. Something was in my mouth, pressing down on my tongue. In my throat. I couldn't close my jaw or swallow.

I could barely breathe.
Something was wrong.

My teeth rubbed against hollow plastic. I tried to bite it, to get up, to do anything, but I barely had the energy to blink. There's tape on my face. I couldn't do anything but wonder why the world's spinning around me.

Then a bang echoed in the room, loud and metallic. I tried to pick up my head, but it's so heavy. Everything is so heavy. I'd never been heavy, but now I felt as if every bone in my body is made of marble, of lead. Heavy, hard, and so, so brittle.

A shadow slipped over me. I blinked, squinting again. Breath rattling in my throat. It's Mom, wasn't it? I figured it out. I was back in the hospital again. This is the part that always comes after the ambulance ride. The tubes, the prick in my arm, the blankets thick over my too-cold feet and hands.

The squeak of wheels. A swivel chair next to my cot. My eyes tried to focus on the blur, but I wasn't wearing my glasses. My vision was a video on 180p. Worse than that. Blurry pixels, only the most basic of shapes and color. Its infuriating in ways few things are. I didn't have my glasses. I couldn't reach for them; even if they were nearby, I wouldn't be able to see them. I don't know what happened to them since I collapsed at home.

"Hello, Amelia." The voice of the black silhouette said. Male, smooth and low. An accent speaking perfect English. I couldn't determine the origin. "I suppose you're wondering what's happened since the ambulance crash."

_Ambulance crash?_ I didn't remember it. I remembered Mom singing to me, I remembered Peter's voice through the cell phone. I remembered the sirens and the blood. Nothing else.

I thought I shook my head, but I was so weak I wasn't sure if thought is translated to movement. I tried to say something — "Where's my mom?" — but the thing that came out of my throat is not a voice. It's a sound. A weak animal cry. Pain and anguish. I didn't want to be here.

"I know, you have many questions." The man said, and his voice is so soothing. It settled me, for some reason. There's a tone to it that made me feel safe, but I didn't understand it. My mind chased this thought as he continued, "And you'll understand everything, in due time. Right now, though, the priority is your health. The Baron informs me that you have a collapsed lung, and are suffering from internal bleeding. Tuberculosis, he says. Your body is slowly shutting itself down from the inside."

The words make me go still, and I barely register it as the man leans his elbow against the mattress, right next to my hip. He is still too far away for me to make out any details of his face. "For now, you will live. We have very good doctors here, and they have extended your longevity for about a week. We have you on life support, and it's doing most of your heart's work for you. It's very weak, I'm afraid. It's impressive it's even lasted this long at all. You're very strong, my little soldier. Now, I must ask you to be brave."

I blinked slowly at him. I didn't really understand the words he was saying, because they made no sense. I was in a hospital. There are doctors. But this man was... _not_ a doctor? Who was he?

I wanted to ask. But the words did not come. I still couldn't speak, the plastic tube still in the way.

My fingers twitched, though. Towards him. I wanted to know.

"Me?" He said, understanding. How he perceived it at all surprised me. I didn't expect my questions to get answered at this point. I determined his accent to be Eastern European. "I'm someone who's very interested in your well-being, Amelia. I think you have much potential, and that potential is of
great use to me. And I have the means to save your life. There is no question to it — you are dying. You will not live much longer if there isn't intervention. The fact that we reached you when we did was a miracle. Had we been any slower, you would surely be dead by now."

I shuddered at that. I choked on the plastic in my throat. My eyes burned. No doctor had ever had the will to say that to me before. As much I wanted them to be honest with me before, I wasn't ready for it. I could feel the tears, hot trails down my face.

The man clucked his tongue, and I feel a touch against my cheek. "Oh, come now, there's no reason to cry, Amelia. You are in good hands here. I promise you, we will not let you die. Fate is on our side. Your salvation is already in your blood. You were born with it. All that's needed is to activate it."

"If not for that, we would never have come for you. Your blood," he pauses, then rectifies, "Your father, I should say, is the reason why you're here. I can see it, in your eyes, you're just like him. And you will make him proud."

This made even less sense. My father? What did my father have to do with this? I never met him. Who was he? Did this man know him? How was it going to save my life? What about him was in my blood? I first thought it was a metaphor, but I was beginning to think he's being completely straightforward.

My blood. My DNA. I was predisposed to something I did not understand. Yet.

Still, I cried, because I want Mom. I was scared, and she was the only one who would make it better. This not-doctor wasn't helping, no matter how kind he sounded.

"I know you must be afraid." The chair squeaked and shifted, and suddenly a face was over mine. I saw him.

I could see him.

"It's in your eyes," he said, and I stared. Green eyes. Dark hair. Clean-shaven and high cheekbones. A handsome face. Middle-aged. A sharpness in his expression that was more terrifying than anything I have ever seen before. He smiled. "It's in your face. I knew you were young but...never imagined just how small you would be. To think you had to live thirteen years of this before we could finally find you, fix you.

"I'm sorry for all the torment you had to endure," he said, and that's when I got it. The way his voice sounded, why it didn't scare me like it should. It sounded like Mom's when I was sick, when I was hurt, when I needed her. "I'm sorry for the pain you are in right now."

It's a voice cultivated only through practice, through years of experience.

The voice of a parent. A father.

His hand brushes against my forehead, pushing hair out of my face. It sends a chill down my back; it's the exact same gesture Mom used with me. "But soon, it will be gone. You will never experience pain like this again. You will never incur another illness. Your eyesight will be perfect. Your liver will not fail — in fact, it will be so efficient that you can never get drunk. Your lungs will not burn and give out. Your legs will support you on your own, and your arms will lift what was never possible before. Your mind will be sharper, faster, than you have ever experienced. You will become something greater than before. Something greater than all of us. An ubermensch. A super soldier."

"You will make me proud." He tucked a lock of hair behind my ear. "My Soldatka."
The scene shifted before I could understand what was happening. In the back of my mind, I knew this wasn't real, that this wasn't happening real-time, and that I was experiencing a memory. Or rather, a collection of memories haphazardly sewn back together again. I had been thirteen again. The kind man's face flickered out, his voice fading into an unintelligible jumbled mess that I could no longer make out — I strained to listen, trying to gather as much information as possible. That man was important, I knew, I just wasn't sure how.

I found myself in a different, but similar cold white room. This time, however, my comfy cot had been replaced by a much less accommodating metal table. An operating table?

I discovered it was a little easier to move — only to find that my wrists and ankles were bound; metal manacles attached to the table. There was also bracing on either side of me head, which kept me from turning and looking around the room. I stared at them, struggled weakly for a moment before giving up. Breathing too hard still hurt. The tube in my mouth had been removed, although the IV in my arm remained.

What caught my eye was the table across from me, against the opposite wall. It was a fairly ordinary table. What rested on top, however, was far from ordinary as I'd ever seen. A gleaming silver and gold staff, something eerie and beautiful, with a sharp, curving top and a blue stone embedded in its center. The stone glowed softly, and I swore I could hear it. Hear it whispering. Whispering soft, sweet words, into my ear.

"Fascinating, isn't it?" said a male voice — a thick German accent. I picked my head up, surprised to see the tall, lean man standing in the corner of the room. My vision was still blurry thanks to lack of glasses, but I could still see that he had his hands clasped behind his back, and I could pick out the shimmer of metals along his lapel. He wore a white apron over a grey uniform, and had red glass over one eye. A monocle? He gestured to the staff when I looked to him, surprised. "You have been staring at this the entire time I have been here. But do not worry — I am not offended. If anything is more deserving of attention, it is certainly this lovely piece."

It definitely wasn't the same man who spoke to me earlier. The voice was a dead giveaway, but I could tell this guy was bald, or maybe a shaved head; hard to say without glasses.

I didn't know if I'd already been awake for some time, or just woke up in this memory. The last I remembered was the man's face, his kind voice. It took me a moment to register I was not alone.

I blinked slowly at him, still pushing the sleep away. "W-who are you…?"

"Ah, yes," The man said — an actual doctor this time? I could just barely make out the stethoscope slung around his neck. "I suppose you wouldn't know. I am Baron von Strucker, head of the science division here in the Crucible, where we forge the greatest of men and weapons. You should be very grateful, Mädchen — without us, not only would you be dead, but you would never see the glory the Chairman intends for you."

To be honest, glory was the last thing on my mind at the moment, but I guess that was obvious from the look on my face, because the man just smiled and pressed a hand to his chest, "I know, I know, how can you be proud of something you have yet to understand? All in due time."

The other man — the Chairman? Him? — said the same thing, but in my memory, I couldn't piece it together. Maybe a little time had passed between the two points. Still, I felt my mouth move, lips stumbling over the words. "I-I'm not who y-you think I-I am. Th-there h-has to be a m-mistake."

Instead of addressing my protest, the Baron merely tilted his head, studying me. That red monocle flickered sinisterly under the light. "Interesting. Have you always had a stutter, Mädchen?"
"I — yes?" I made a face, caught off guard by the question.

"A developmental disorder, I presume."

I could only shrug helplessly. What did it matter? "I was born premature. Twenty-three weeks."

"Twenty-three weeks old?" The Baron chuckled. "Well, isn't that a miracle. What is it, Mädchen, that has you so determined to live, against all odds?"

"I…I don't know. I just want to live. Don't most people?"

"A few, I suppose," Von Strucker nodded slightly, as if appraising my answer. "But that is not what I meant. Why do you still continue to live? Why have you made it this far, when all you have ever faced is opposition and discouragement."

"How could you possibly know —"

"I know many things, Fraulein Fletcher," The Baron interrupted me. "What I don't know is what pushes you to keep fighting?"

To be honest, I was terrified. I didn't want to answer that question. I was afraid there was a wrong answer, and what would happen if I said it. There was a clinical chill to the Baron's words that made me feel as though I was less of a patient and more of a guinea pig, and considering the predicament I was in, this was not good news.

So, I considered his question, quiet for a long moment. If was I was going to answer this, I might as well be truthful.

Then, it came to me. A single word.

"Spite."

The Baron laughed, apparently very amused by this. "Ah! Well, I would expect no less from an American. You Westerners have an interesting idea of how the world works, don't you? Too bad it has changed so greatly that you no longer recognize it anymore."

I had no idea what he meant by that, and didn't get the chance to ask, as the Baron moved on, stepping forward.

"Do you know what this is?" The Baron asked, gesturing to the alien-looking staff thing on its pedestal.

"No," I said. My eyes kept flicking between the glowing blue stone set into the metal scepter and the red monocle on the Baron's face. Both were equally ridiculous and I couldn't figure out which to focus on.

"This," Von Strucker said, pacing back and forth in front of the table, his eyes casting over the weapon with a sort enraptured glee. "Is our lovely little secret here in the Crucible. A recent acquisition that will prove most useful in the upcoming procedure. Tell me, Mädchen, do you know the secret ingredient to the Super Soldier Project that made Captain America such a success? A process perfected once, and then never again?"

"Isn't it that p-protein in b-b-bananas?" Something about this all had numbed me; for some reason, I had an answer for that, and there was nothing in my mind to stop from me from saying it. It almost
felt like I was in class, answering a teacher's question. "P-potassium. The U.S. g-government d-declassified and r-released information on P-Project: Rebirth in the Eighties, a-along w-with other World War II doc-documents that had b-been kept c-confidential up u-until that p-point. It's common knowledge now."

"You would make an exceptional student, but I'm afraid that is incorrect," The Baron said with a jerk of his chin, casting a smirk in my direction. He raised a finger, adding, "Of course, you are not wrong, per se. Potassium was an ingredient that later experiments did not have. But we have that accounted for. I meant, obviously, the other secret ingredient."

I blinked at him, utterly confused. "I-I d-didn't know th-there was a-another one. Potassium i-is the only o-one they e-ever t-talk about."

"Of course it is," Von Strucker chuckled, shaking his head. "Do you really think they would be foolish enough to reveal all of their secrets to the public? Thanks to our spies, however, the KGB has successfully uncovered the truth behind Project: Rebirth. The serum we do not have to worry about, as it has already been synthesized with your DNA, since conception. The Vita-Rays however, proved to be a challenge."

"V-Vita Rays?" I gaped. I had no idea that radiation was a part of Captain America's transformation. Although that would explain that Hulk fiasco. Wasn't it some physicist who thought he could recreate the experiment by using Gamma rays instead?

The very thought of becoming like the Hulk, a massive monster that destroyed half of Harlem, horrified me. "You're g-going to expose me to r-r-radiation?"

"Oh, do not panic. Panic will be no good." Von Strucker shook his head in disappointment. "You must simply understand. It is to activate the serum in your blood. That was its entire function after all. The serum carried the proteins, the radiation activated them, and your entire physiology is changed. Everything will go well, I can promise you that."

"D-didn't go s-so well for t-the Red Skull," I pointed out, my voice trembling. Oh, my god, this was really happening, wasn't it? Is that why I was strapped to this table? Why they had pulled me from half of that life support machine?

"No," Baron von Strucker conceded with a dip of his head, making a face. "Of course, we accounted for that as well. We are well aware of how the patient's psyche can affect the outcome of the procedure, and how disastrous it can be. But we are not worried — you are not a Nazi, are you?"

I almost snorted. "No."

"Hmm," The Baron smirked, perhaps amused by how offended I was. "Well, good for you."

Before I could question the implication of that, the Baron turned sharply on his heel, coming around the back of the table, and slipping his hands underneath the scepter, raising it a few inches up into the air, as though presenting it to me. "This little cosmic beauty has very unique properties. One of them just happens to be emitting Vita radiation. The other?" At this, the Baron met my eyes, and smiled a wicked smile. "Inducing devastating punishment."

"W-what?" My mouth suddenly went dry, and I started to fidget as the Baron, scepter still in hand, came around to the operating table. "W-what do you mean? What are you going to do?"

"I am going to save you, Mädchen," The Baron loomed over me, the silver-and-gold staff glimmering menacingly under the too-bright operating lights. I didn't fail to notice a strange aura
starting to swirl around the blue stone. His face was engulfed in shadow, and the only thing I could see was the faint glow of his red monocle. "I am going to fix you, make you better. Like a caterpillar metamorphosing into a butterfly, you will ascend to your pinnacle stage, under the power of this Aesir weapon. You will be the magnum opus of mankind. Through this stone in my power, I will mold both your body and your mind to my will — and the Chairman's will. No longer shall you be held back by your physical weaknesses. No longer will you be motivated by your own willful spite, as you call it. From this moment on, you will serve a greater cause. Peace, through force."

My heart was pounding and it hurt, I was breathing so hard I was afraid I'd start choking on blood again. Voice barely a choked whisper, I asked, "W-why are you t-telling me this?"

"A man of science is allowed to be proud of his work," the Baron replied, his teeth gleaming under the light. "And if anyone should know, it should be you. You shall change the world, Fraulein Fletcher. And it will be all thanks to me. Now, open wide."

"Wha—" I said, bewildered, but fell for it anyways. Mouth open in asking the question, I found myself suddenly choking on a gag suddenly stuffed into my mouth. It seemed to be made of metal and plastic, and I found myself biting down immediately, trying to spit it out.

But I never got the chance.

"This will only hurt a little bit," The Baron said, before pressing the tip of the scepter to my forehead.

My vision went white. Burning heat, like fire, spread out from where the scepter touched me; like acid flooding from the top of my head to the ends of my toes. So hot, and sharp, like knives and needles shoved into my skin. Nothing, nothing like I had ever felt before. Or ever will again.

And I screamed.

✮✮✮

I was still screaming when I awoke.

"Amelia!" Wanda cried, hands on my shoulders, gripping me tight as I struggled against an invisible force, my throat ragged and sore. "Amelia, it's just me! It was a nightmare! You are fine!"

"N-no, not a nightmare," I shook my head, pressing my hands to my head, curling up into a fetal position. My stomach was doing flips and I felt like I was going to puke. My head still ached and burned, like I could still feel where the scepter touched me. My voice was shaky, wet with tears. "Not a nightmare. I-I remembered...I remembered him. I was there. I was awake when it happened."

"Remembered what?" Pietro asked, kneeling beside Wanda. I looked up, found myself in a dark corner of the boxcar, away from the open door or anything that could get me hurt. I felt strangely safe, the wall at my back, them in front of me — like a shield from everything that hurt.

The dizziness was partly due to the fact that I could see well again — the memories had reminded me just how bad my eyesight used to be, essentially living in this awful fog world, and now seeing everything in sharp detail was over-stimulating my brain. I had to keep closing my eyes just to find relief.

"All of it?" Wanda asked, smiling hopefully.
"No," I shook my head, dropping one arm so it flopped at my side. The whole experience left me exhausted. I wiped at my face, and found there was dried blood beneath my nose. Grimacing, I scratched at it, trying to get rid of it. "No, just the...just the start, I think. The Baron, how he changed me. And the Chairman."

The twins stared at me. "You saw him?" They demanded in unison.

"Um, yeah," I said, rubbing at my eyes. His face was still there. His and the Baron's. It was not pleasant, to say the least. "He was there, when I first woke up. He was...I don't know. He was nice to me."

Pietro snorted, throwing his head back. "Please."

I just sighed, shrugged my shoulders helplessly. "I'm just saying, that's what it felt like. I know what kind of guy he is, I'm not an idiot. It was just weird, that's all. Communist tyrant has nice manners, seemed almost normal for five seconds."

"We've never seen him." Wanda said, her brow drawing together as she raised her chin in suspicion. "Never spoke to him."

"He must take it personally, then," Pietro surmised, half-joking. "That you escaped him after he was so nice to you."

"Ha-ha," I said sarcastically, but it was to hide the fact that I was scared Pietro had a point. The Chairman had been unfailingly polite, charming in a way that made it scary to think of disappointing him. I wondered what a man like that would like when he was angry.

Considering the type of people the Chairman hired/created, I couldn't imagine he handled rejection well.

Ugh.

The headache remained, and I still felt dizzy. Right now, that was my biggest problem. "Why did that even happen? How? I mean, the bleeding nose, the everything..."

"Could be a side effect," Wanda offered, but she didn't look me in the eye. "Of the, er, the amnesia. Maybe seeing things, it brings your memories back? Parts of it, at least."

"Yeah, I suppose," I said, closing my eyes and resting my head on my knees. "I just wish it didn't feel like getting hit by a truck."

The blood made me think it was bad. I mean, normally I'd be pretty chuffed to know that my lost memories weren't gone forever, that I was in the process of recovering them so soon after all this started for me — but I was also pretty sure that bleeding noses was not a common symptom of memory loss or recovery. What was that about? Did it have to do with that freaky scepter thing? Or was it something else that happened to me?

Well, I wasn't going to find any answers here. I just hoped if it happened again, it wouldn't knock me out.

But the scariest thing was — in the few seconds after I woke up, I couldn't remember who I was. Not those lost memories, not the current ones, not even my own name — until Wanda said it.

Could I lose my memories again? Could I lose all of them?
Would I forget my entire identity? My entire life?

I couldn't bear the possibility.

"Is it that bad?" Pietro frowned, reaching out to steady me. "Perhaps you should lay down again, if you are not well."

"No, I'm fine, it should pass," I said, having no idea if it would. Right now, I didn't want to lie down, because I was afraid of going to sleep, and afraid of what I would dream. Would I have another terrible memory? The last two had felt so real, like I was actually reliving them. Every cold surface, every ache in my bones, every dust particle in the air, I had experienced it all. And I had a bad feeling that the beginning had hardly been the worst for me in the Crucible. "I just…I need to think for a little bit."

"We are here to help, okay?" Wanda assured me, taking my hand in hers. "We will be careful next time, in case it happens again. You could get very hurt, yes?"

"Well, at least the worst is over, right?" I asked with a reassuring smile.

I did not expect to be proven wrong so soon.

*Thump, thump.*

A noise overhead.

All three of us looked up, surprised. Pietro frowned, was the first to ask, "What was that?"

"Don't know," Wanda said, slowly rising to her feet. "Hail, perhaps?"

Then we heard it again, a thumping across the roof. It sounded far too heavy to be snow. All three of us exchanged looks, and I got up as well. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Something weird was going on here. I hoped to God it wasn't. "I don't know, it sounds too heavy…"

"I'll go check," Pietro said, already climbing up the crates to reach the ceiling hatch. But Wanda was right on his heel, despite his complaints, and then I was close in tow, bringing up the rear. Together, we braced our hands against the heavy metal hatch and pushed it open, our heads popping up in unison.

I got a face-full of cold wind so fast and so hard it almost gave me whiplash. My eyes watered and my cheeks stung, and I had to blink and look away, before adjusting again. Pietro climbed out first, helping us up onto the snow-covered roof of the car. The train wasn't going so fast as to blow it off, but the constant rocking and the sheer cliffside wasn't exactly reassuring, either.

It was, as expected, cloudy. I was getting sick of clouds. Flakes fell from the sky, whipping past us like tiny, spiraling bullets. Aside from the wind and the rattle of the rails, there was no sound up here. The three of us stood together, looking around.

"I do not see anything!" Wanda shouted, squinting against the wind. Her hair was a mess, whipping about in a startling resemblance to Medusa.

"Whatever it was," Pietro said, turning to us with a shrug. "Must be gone now."

But I wasn't so sure. Blistering cold wind cut through my clothes like a knife through butter, but I barely felt it as I stepped closer to the back end of the car, noticing a disturbance in the snow. This latter half of the roof was clean, the snow blown off by the backdraft, but I still managed to spot the
tail end of what looked like a shoe-print, right before the drop-off into the drawbar and couplers below. There, I thought I saw movement.

Starting to peer over, I held up a hand and called, "Wait a sec, guys, I think there's something —"

**BOOM.**

The car in front of me exploded.

I cried out as crimson ball of fire erupted less than ten feet away from my face.

The force of the blast alone sent me flying, straight off my feet and right into the twins, who'd been coming up behind me. Hot metal and wood flew everywhere, bouncing off the mountain wall to the left, and tumbling down the ravine to the right.

The train rocked violently, our boxcar nearly blasted off its wheels. The back end reared up before crashing down again, thankfully aligning with the tracks as it meant to.

We landed hard, sprawling in a tangle. Pietro, the furthest, nearly fell off the other end of the car. He cried out, but I acted faster, grabbing his wrist before he could completely disappear over the side. "Pietro! Hang on!"

"I'm hanging!" he called back, twisting in my grip, falling against the side of the boxcar.

I winced, started hauling him up. Wanda, lying next to me, appeared dazed, moving sluggishly, her eyes unfocused. A streak of blood smeared across her face, congealing fast in the frosty air, corresponding to the sudden new gash across her forehead. She must have been struck by something in the explosion.

I myself wasn't feeling too hot, so to speak. The left side of my face was stinging, like a bad sunburn, since I had turned my head just as the explosion went off. It didn't feel too bad — although that might be the adrenaline talking.

"Are you okay?" I grunted, finally getting Pietro back onboard.

He winced, and smelled distinctly of smoke, but otherwise appeared unharmed. "Fine. Wanda?"

"Been better," she muttered, wavering slightly as Pietro took her by the arm, helped her to her feet. He fusssed over her wound, tutting as he pushed her hair out of her face, while Wanda whined only half-heartedly, trying to angle her face away. "Ah, Pietro! Stop it, I am not a baby!"

"But look at that cut! You may need stitches!"

"You worry too much!"

"Only about you, pen."

"Pah! You sound like Dai,"

"Oh, like you remember…"

"I am only twelve seconds younger, stupid prala…"

I quickly lost interest in their banter, partly because it was getting a little annoying, and more importantly because some new contenders had just entered the scene. "Uh, guys…?"
The twins stopped at once, their attention following my gaze to the back end of the car. The explosion had torn off the entire latter half of the train, leaving at least half of our own boxcar scorched, and at the ass-end of what was still a very long, very dangerous journey.

On which we were no longer spending alone.

From the back of the boxcar, stood three people. All adults, tall, muscled, and although each face was different, they all shared similar expressions: hardened and cruel, scarred by war. They wore white camouflage armor; a few had no sleeves, some wore shirts. I wondered how any of them could stand the cold like that — before remembering I could, too.

"Shit!" Pietro's hiss was the only warning I had that there was more danger.

I glanced behind me, and was alarmed to see more of these agents appearing behind us, from further up the train. All along the line of boxcars, they stood in stoic silence — in matching armor and patches, the sharp expressions on their faces. So many. Too many. I couldn't count them.

My eyes widened, breath caught in my throat. Fear rose in my gut at the sight of them, cold and clawing, turning everything solid and heavy. Then, remembering myself, I turned my gaze back to the three before us, knowing it was stupid to let myself get distracted with danger so near. I had taken too long to process the situation. Those three seconds where I looked behind me, the three agents could've attacked, taken me out, before I even had a chance to protect myself.

So slow. So stupid.

So silent.

I stared at those three, realizing I knew them.

Two males, and one female with striking red hair.

Agent Brandt — the Vulkan — was back.

---

Found some concept art of Wanda and Pietro that sort of match what they look like/are wearing right now.
This is what the Crucible looks like. It’s not the same fortress as the one in AOU — that’s a different location.

And here’s a reference for the Chairman — actor Rufus Sewell, who is amazing in *Man in the High Castle*, and has that sort of personality and expression that I imagine the Chairman to have.
Hope these images aren’t too distracting for you. I kind of have specific ideas for things, and I like to share them with you guys, so you know what I mean. I sometimes see writing as movies, especially with Marvel, so it feels a little appropriate.

Chapter End Notes

*Pen - Romani for sister

*Prala - Romani for brother
Chapter Twenty-One

Chapter Summary

So Cold // Breaking Benjamin
https://youtu.be/fia3HCuZgYI

Chapter Twenty-One

No one moved.

So silent. The three of us, me and the twins, stood in a tight circle, surrounded on all conceivable sides. There was nowhere to go, nowhere to escape. To jump from this train meant certain death. Either we fell thousands of feet into the snow landscape, or become a Jackson Pollock between the train and the rock wall.

I didn't take my eyes off of Brandt, if only because I knew her. Well, I didn't know her, and in fact I recognized almost all the faces here from the streets of Novi Grad, but she was the only one whose name I had. Something about her screamed dominance, however — maybe it was the way she held herself, shoulders back, relaxed arms; or maybe it was the scars across her mouth, and ironic smile on her lips, like she had a witty, cruel joke just on the tip of her tongue.

In those few hair-raising moments of utter stillness, I tried to figure out what was going on. Why hadn't the Vulkan attacked us yet? The explosion could've killed us, certainly, but it hadn't. Now they had us surrounded. The odds definitely weren't on our side here.

No one moved. I felt Wanda's hand brush against mine. The point where skin touched sparked bright red — I didn't have to look around to tell if her eyes were red, or that she was spinning webs of magic through her fingers. Pietro, likewise, was unusually still, especially for him. Everything from him was careful, cautious. He was holding himself back. I could practically hear his atoms vibrating, stress and tension just ready to break into action.

A low dread hung in the air. One way or another, this wasn't going to end peacefully. Not if the twins had any say in it, at least.

Brandt broke the silence first.

"This can go one of two ways, Amelia," she called out, her voice carrying well despite the whistling wind. Her short red hair, whipping behind her head, was a violent splash of color against the cold white mountains. "The smart way, or the fun way. It's up to you."

She was speaking in English again, as if she knew that would get to me easier. Well, it worked. The air had sucked all the moisture out of my mouth, so I had nothing left but to swallow on a dry, frozen throat. "Do I want to know what the fun way is?"
"You don't remember?" Brandt tilted her head curiously, a grin spreading across her features, making my gut twist in trepidation. "None of the training matches, nothing what I taught you? No? Well, I thought the rumors were exaggerating, but I guess it's true — your memories really are gone! I wonder how that happened."

At this, she threw a pointed look over my shoulder, but I didn't have the luxury of following her gaze. I wasn't risking a blind spot just to follow along. She was looking at Wanda. I couldn't keep the stutter from slipping into my voice. "Y-you trained me?"

"Why, yes," Brandt's eyes flicked back to me, again with that sharp-toothed grin. "Well, I wasn't the only one. You were such a good little soldier, Amelia. But lately you've been a very bad girl, ever since you let those two get into your head."

"I don't need them to know I want nothing to do with you or the Chairman," I snapped, my hands clenching at my sides.

"Oh, now that hurts," Brandt pouted mockingly at me, pressing a hand to her chest as if I just made a personal offense. "I'm going to have to ask you to apologize."

"What?" I scoffed, threw her a disbelieving look.

"You heard me," Brandt said, her voice remaining even as she lowered her arms. The veins running down her wrist started to glow — first orange, then bright gold, as the skin of her hands turned a translucent red, cracked like lava. "Apologize, now. Use that head of yours and remember that I am the last person you want to piss off here, yeah? Show me you can still be obedient, and I can promise you a less…severe punishment for going AWOL. And maybe I'll leave the two freaks a little singed."

I didn't answer right away. Was there really a choice in this? Before I had doubted that these agents, whatever they were, would kill the twins. But the way Brandt spoke, implied that their health wasn't nearly as prioritized as mine was.

Or maybe Brandt was just a sadistic monster.

I clenched my fists. "No."

"Oh yay," she said. "The fun way it is, then."

Probably that last one, then.

"Let me guess," Pietro said in a low voice, as the agents started advancing on us, simultaneously bursting into flames. "It didn't go well?"

"What gave it away?" I replied, pressing back a little as Brandt narrowed down on me. The other two on her heels were equally imposing, particularly the one chewing gum, with the shaved head. I definitely didn't like him, just on looks alone. "Was it the exploding train or their friendly faces that clued you in first?"

I never got a reply. Pietro had already taken off.

A shout behind me.

Then all chaos broke loose.

To say the situation was precarious would be putting it lightly. I didn't like fighting to begin with, so
you could imagine how much I appreciated going toe-to-toe with a bunch of very hot, very psychotic agents on top of a swaying train car hanging over the edge of a steep mountainside.

Here's a little hint: No.

Brandt came at me first. I dodged the first swipe and ducked under the second, before grabbing her by the front of her clothes and throwing her overhead. Brandt twisted in midair, like an acrobat, before landing on her feet, one train car ahead. There, the other half-dozen agents were in battle with the twins, who filled the air with flashes of scarlet and silver.

Watching her arc through the air, my head was turned and I didn't anticipate the following attack. A hot grip got me by the back of the neck. I cried out at the scalding touch, before reaching up behind my head and grabbing the offender by the arm and shoulder. Fast, I dropped to my knees, taking him over and flipping him on his back to the ground in front of me. Snow blew away from impact, and I cut around, sweeping my leg to knock over the third male agent coming up directly behind the second one.

Two agents on the ground. I dealt with the one I took out first. The bubble-gum-chewing one. He seemed only mildly dazed, and when our eyes met, he grinned at me, all pearly-white teeth and searing red eyes. "Miss me, sweetheart?"

I blinked at him startled. Those words, that voice, tickled something in the back of my head. "Savin?"

The name left my lips before I could think of what it meant, or what it was. A name? His name?

He only smiled wider, showing the wad of gum clenched in his teeth. "Aww, you do remember me!"

There was something cloyingly sweet and insincere in those words, a thin veil covering something cold and awful beneath. Not convinced.

How did I know him? I mean Savin in particular, why did I remember his name but none of the others? Not even Brandt was that special, apparently.

I grit my teeth, and delivered a punch straight into that mug. "Hardly."

Savin grunted when my fist met his nose, ripping away, just in time for me to get kicked in the gut. I gasped, rolling over, looking up to see the third agent standing over me, raising his boot again.

He didn't get a chance to strike before a red bolt shot through the air and slammed into his chest. The agent's cry was sucked away by the wind as he was thrown from my field of vision.

I jolted up, looking to the right, where the attack had come from. My eyes found Wanda, three cars down. She was still turned in my direction, her arms raised. She gave me a quick nod, before blasting another agent off the train, into the ravine below.

Yikes.

I wasn't trying particularly hard to kill anyone as I continued to fight, scrambling further up the train to regroup with the twins. I mean, actually kill someone? I had specifically avoided picking up any guns during the battle in Sokovia, I wasn't changing that now. I guess it was a little easier here; none of the Vulkan agents here seemed to be armed, in the traditional sense. They all seemed content with trying to burn us alive instead.
Savin was right on my heel, I could practically feel him, the heat of his body, following me. All of the agents had that, these rippling waves just coming off them from all the heat they were generating.

I tried getting distance from him, ducking and weaving between combatants, hoping maybe the twins might take care of him. But Wanda was busy trading magical blasts with fiery one between four other agents, while Pietro was trapped in fight with Brandt and a few others. The train left him with very little space to actually run, and the agents had the clever idea of heating up the metal rooves of the train cars, forcing Pietro to avoid them and come directly into their line of fire.

No, I couldn't make them fight my fights. I had to take care of this myself.

I turned on my heel, coming to a stop so fast that the momentum gave me enough force to spin around and send a round-house kick directly into Savin's chest. He took the blow full on, but only shifted back a few feet before recovering. Didn't even fall back, not even a grunt of pain. His nose had already healed from my earlier blow. I was already reconsidering this fight with a man who weighed twice as much as I did.

Savin came at me like a beast, snarling with a viciousness only seen in wild animals. Hands light up in balls of flame, he made open-handed swipes at me. I had no choice but to avoid them or face serious damage — I couldn't afford taking any blows from these guys. I didn't heal as fast as them, and I really didn't want to know what it was like to have third-degree burns anywhere near my head.

It made it that much harder to fight back. I tried a jab, but had to jump back or take a hit to my chest. I couldn't get too close or else get burned, but how else could I hurt him back? It was a deadly game of back-and-forth.

A kick to the knee here, a punch into the gut there. An elbow jab to the shoulder, knee to the groin, right hook to the jaw. Savin took each of these blows with no sell — I gave him all I was worth, but it was nothing to him. What the hell?

All I really served to do was pissing him off and getting too close. Each consecutive strike just made him scowl deeper. Well, at least I was annoying him.

He had to lower his body temperature in order to grab me without immediate casualty. I gasped as his still-too-hot hands wrapped around my throat and arms. He caught me in the middle of a strike, and forced my arm across my chest, immobilizing me as he drew me in face-to-face.

"Would you kindly," Savin snarled through gritted teeth, his grip around my neck burning as he clenched tighter with each word. "Jump off this train and die?"

I stared at him, my mouth open in a choke, but that didn't stop me from replying. "Sorry. Suicide's just not my style."

I punctuated this with a stomp. Luckily, Savin wasn't so hot in other parts of his body, namely his legs and feet. My heel made touchdown through his steel-toed boots.

Savin, caught off-guard, released me with a snarl. I spun away from him, my feet slipping over the slick metal. I managed to catch myself at the very edge of the boxcar, dropping to a crouch with one hand on the roof, balancing myself.

"You idiot!" Brandt shouted from up the train, trying to catch Pietro. Her head whipped back by a lightning-fast punch, but she recovered almost instantly, her face rendered into a terrible grimace. "You have to trigger her first! Activate her sleeper state!"

Trigger me? Sleeper state? What the hell did that mean?
Savin's only response was an incoherent shout of frustration, before turning back on me. I was still crouched at the end of the boxcar. There was nowhere for me to go as Savin took one looming step closer, and opened his mouth in a snarl.

My eyes went wide in bewilderment as he started to speak.

"бунтарь —" Buntar.

Rebel.

I squinted at him, caught off guard.

"Колумбия — " Kolumbiya.

Columbia.

Wait, what…

"Стремящийся — " Stremyashchiysya.

Aspiring.

No. No, those words. I knew those words like I knew my name. They echoed in my head like a distant song from my childhood, resurfaced. But where —

"Amelia!" Wanda called, her voice piercing the growing buzz in my head. Her words were desperate, a plea for strength. "Don't listen! Cover your ears!"

I tried to. I really did. But it was so hard.

My arms were dead weight, like lead at my sides, and I trembled, trying to make them move. A part of me didn't want to. A part of me just wanted to slip into the calm, still nothing in the deepest, darkest, coldest part of my mind, where nothing, nothing could ever reach me again…

"Девяносто —" Devyanosto.

Ninety.

The world faded into a blur behind Savin. I could feel my focus failing, only able to hear Savin's voice. I was vaguely aware of Wanda in the distance, raising a glowing shield to protect herself from a fiery barrage, but it only lasted a few seconds before the thin, glimmering energy shattered under the force of the agents' blows.

She kept throwing desperate looks at me, knowing what was happening but being unable to reach me. I wanted to reach back. What was going on? Why was this happening to me?

"Баюкать —" Bayukat.

Cradle.

I had to help her. But I couldn't. I didn't want to…

WHAM.

A silver streak swept around me, and I caught a glimpse of Pietro in front of me, turning on a dime as he spun. His fist came up hard beneath Savin's chin before the agent could say the next word —
Savin didn't stand a chance against Pietro's surprise attack, and didn't have a chance to defend himself against the follow up blow to his gut.

Savin grunted once before he was sent flying back, bouncing off the roof once before finally falling off the train.

And just like that, I was released. The invisible vice in my mind vanished, and I dropped to my hands and knees, suddenly out of breath.

"Amelia!" Pietro was at my side in an instant, picking me up. I was a little light-headed, but the world was quickly coming back into sharp focus. "Are you okay? He almost had you!"

"I'm fine, I think," I said, pressing a hand against my head, taking in a few more gulps of air. It felt like I had been suffocating only a few seconds before. Now a bright pain was shooting through my head, like waking up from a bad spell or a hangover. "Just a headache."

Then, remembering we still had a problem to deal with, I pulled away from Pietro. I pointed down the train, said, "Go protect Wanda! Her back's undefended. I'll take care of the rest!"

It was a hazy plan, but a plan nonetheless. Pietro gave me only a brief nod before taking off, reappearing the next second at Wanda's side. A male agent who'd been about to tackle her was suddenly sent flying over the side of the train. I jumped forward, going after Brandt. She had an eternal spot on my shit-list now.

She turned to face me with a sneer, as if expecting my attack. I came at her with a raised fist. Brandt dodged, brought her heel up and down towards my knee.

"You should've listened, you stupid girl!" Brandt hissed. "You think I'm not afraid to hurt you? The Crucible can rebuild whatever I destroy."

I slipped back, avoiding the blow that would've taken me down. I took another blow against my forearm, blocking a strike that would've cut across my cheek. "Hurt me all you want, I'm not going back."

"Why?" her laugh was high-pitched and mocking. "You don't even remember! It's not nearly as bad as you think."

Brandt's hand, although having touched me for only a second, still burned. I had to keep from recoiling and dropping my guard, wincing. I retaliated with a left hook, then snapping a kick to the side, taking out an oncoming agent who thought he could sideline me unawares.

"Not interested!"

"We made you stronger!" Brandt snapped, and I ducked just in time before a wave of fire could envelope my head. "We made you better! You were a part of something, Amelia. A part of something incredible. And you want to abandon it for, what, your little friends? A home you don't even have anymore? How pathetic!"

"What?" I stared at her for a second, taken aback. What did she mean, a home I didn't have anymore? "What happened to my home? What did you do?"

"Oh, I didn't do anything!" Brandt said, holding out her arms. "Blame it on the Avengers! New York was just the beginning. Thanks to them, the world has changed!"

I had no idea what she meant, but I was so angry I didn't care. With her arms open, I took the
opportunity to attack, but she brushed me off easily, and I stumbled, nearly falling over the edge. I had a good look at the small crevice between the mountain wall and the rushing train, for a second convinced I would be crushed down there, before a hot grip caught my wrist at the last second.

I cried out as Brandt's grip burned my skin. I twisted around to look at her, as she held me precariously over the edge, my head mere feet from death. My feet slipped and skidded on the lip of the roof, trying to pick myself up, but I couldn't, not at this angle.

"You think this new world will accept you, what you are?" Brandt demanded over the wind, looking down on me as I hung onto her for dear life. My hair whipped by my face as I stared into hers, terrified. She crowed, "You'll only be safe inside the Crucible, under the Chairman."

I could only blink up at her, both helpless and bewildered at once. "I don't believe you!"

"I'm trying to do you a favor!" Brandt snapped, throwing her head back in frustration. The movement dropped me down several inches, and I reacted instinctively — my free hand coming up to grab her arm. I had to bite back a cry as her skin burned me. "You don't belong with them anymore! You never will!"

That's when she hauled me up by my arm, taking her other hand and grabbing me by the collar, so our faces were mere inches to each other. I couldn't look away from her glowing yellow eyes, boring into mine. There was something akin to pity in her expression as Brandt said, "Trust me, Amelia, you don't want to learn that the hard way."

I was breathing hard, panting after hanging over certain death only a few moments ago. But with Brandt holding me up higher, I finally found enough footing again. My left heel had just touched solid ground when I let out a strange half-laugh, half-cry, somewhere between utter terror and the dazed humor of someone in serious denial.

"Too bad," I could only say with a shrug, letting go of Brandt's arm and grabbing her coat. "I was never a fast learner."

And with that, I shifted my weight forward and shoved Brandt away from me.

Brandt cried out, caught by surprise. Her scorching grip ripped right through the collar of my shirt, leaving a burnt hole behind. She stumbled back, my strength greater than her weight could account for. By the time she recovered, I had spun away, taking on the nearest Komitet agent.

He was facing away from me, so had no defense when I grabbed him by the shoulders and slammed him back, limbo-style. I brought his head across my knee — his head, on fire, seared my jeans, but he was unconscious before any serious damage could be done.

"Fool!" Brandt cried, snatching me back by the hair, and I retaliated with an elbow to the gut. Brandt folded inward, and I spun halfway, bringing my other fist down on her shoulder.

But Brandt was far from out. On her stomach, she swiped at my ankle, and knocked my legs out from underneath me. I landed hard on my back, head snapping back against the metal roof.

Stars filled my vision. The air was filled with the stench of smoke and burning fiber. In the distance, a faint rumble emerged. I had no idea what it was at first, I wasn't even paying attention, too busy blocking one of Brandt's fists while delivering a kick to her hip at the same time. I could feel the hairs on my arm singed off from the intense heat; I guess I was lucky it wasn't anything else.

Although I was on my back, and Brandt was trying with renewed effort to kill me, I was still alive, still kicking, if a little dazed. At least it couldn't get much worse than this.
Or so I thought.

I was in the middle of wrestling with Brandt, who managed to get on top of me. Her hands had found my throat, attempting to strangle the life out of me. My hands alternated between trying to wrench off her grip, and hitting her hard enough to let go.

It wasn't working: chest, side, stomach, Brandt only bared her teeth and absorbed my attacks.

That distant rumble got louder. A rhythm emerged.

"I should've done this first time," She rasped, fiery visage looming over me. "Fool me once, for thinking you deserved a choice. **Buntar. Kolumbiya. Stremyashchiysya —**"

**whup-whup-whup-wHUP-WHUP-WHUP-WHUP**

Recognizing the sound of downwash, my head snapped to the side. I looked over to the open side of the mountain just in time to see an attack helicopter emerging from the valley below. It rose until it was level with the train. The low hum became a roar, effectively interrupting Brandt. She, too, looked up, seeming just as surprised as I was to see the helicopter.

Right before it opened fire.

"Holy shit!" Brandt screeched, right before I kicked her off.

Immediately, I hefted myself up in a backflip I didn't know I could do. Just in time to avoid the spray of bullets. They bisected the boxcar, perforating the thin wood slats like pellets into paper, and going right through where Brandt and I had been lying earlier. Wood splinters flew everywhere, and I threw up my arms to protect my face.

Without waiting for either Brandt or the helicopter to react, I turned tail and ran for the twins.

The fight with Brandt had disoriented me, and when I looked for where the twins were last, I was surprised when they weren't there anymore. It took me a second to get my bearings again, as I jumped the next train car, bullets hot on my heel.

Wanda was ahead, battling with two agents. Hearing the gunfire, she turned her head. I waved my arms as I ran for her. My voice was a panicked cry: "Wanda! The chopper! The chopper!"

She didn't question the order, just blasted the two agents back before turning to face the helicopter, lobbing bright red blasts at it. The gunfire veered away from us as the helicopter canted up and backwards to avoid the shots.

Being that she was the only one with range between the three of us, so it was down to her to take it down. I didn't doubt Wanda's capability, but I knew it was unfair and insane to make her fight both the helicopter and the agents at the same time. I tackled one of her attackers, just as Pietro swooped in to deck the other.

I slammed my goon down, hand at the nape of his neck, knee between his shoulder blades. He struggled only for a moment before Pietro stepped in to deliver a kick to his head.

Getting to my feet, I said, "Pietro! You and me keep the others away from her!"

He offered no argument, just a quick nod before darting off again. Most of the agents were behind us, including Brandt, who was starting to catch up. Three more were ahead. Maybe I was dreaming it, but were there more here than what we started with? I couldn't remember, I'd stopped counting
after Brandt strangled me.

There were six cars between us and the end of the train. The rest stretched on ahead, around the curve of the mountain. The only sign of the train itself was the thin trail of smoke above, but the sheer rock side hide the rest from us. I remembered counting them back at the train station, although now, in the heat of the moment, the number escaped me. What was it? Twenty, thirty loads? As a supply train, it must be meant to last Sokovia for long stretches of time.

Well, that wasn't really important right now. I faced forward, facing the three agents coming in. This was going to be fun.

The piece of the roof at my feet had been nearly torn free, and was now hanging by a thin shred, probably thanks to Wanda. I grabbed it, twisted it free. I raised the improvised shield just in time to deflect a fireball that had been coming right for my head.

Damn lucky.

I decided not to count on my so-called luck for too long. Using the metal sheet, I thrust the broad side against the chest of Vulkan #1, who reached me first.

Shoving him aside, I twisted around and slammed my heel into the thigh of Vulkan #2, who went down on a knee with a grunt of pain. Ducking under #1's retaliating hook, I came up and slammed the top edge of the metal into #3's chin, knocking him back.

It was the four of us, in a whirlwind of trading blows, with me at the center like the eye of the storm. I had to keep moving, keep spinning around, so I didn't leave any one of them at my back unguarded. #2 took a hit to the schnozz from my foot. #1 got his arm bent the wrong way when I caught it between my shield and twisted in just the right way. #3 got in a strike to my ribcage, nearly winding me before I swept under his follow-up and grabbed the back of his head.

With that kind of torque, I threw him forward, straight into #2, who'd been coming at me at the same time. #2 wasn't fast enough to avoid #3, and their heads smashed into each other, and they dropped in unison.

In the background, Wanda was still throwing magic bolts at the helicopter, but only managed to hit its skid rails and the open gull-wing door. Shrapnel took out the gunner, but that was more chance than skill. The helicopter was still up, and another man took dead gunner's place.

And Pietro was somewhere in the back, bouncing between seven other agents (and Brandt) like he was in a demonic pinball machine. *Ping! Ping! Ping! Ping!* What he lacked in strength he made up for in speed, and was nigh uncatchable for the increasingly perturbed agents, who couldn't move a single step without being struck again. Then Pietro zipped away untouched with a laugh, like the evil little gremlin he was.

Back to Vulkan #1. His broken arm already straightening itself, he came at me with greater gusto. I stumbled back, ducking and dodging three consecutive swings he took at me, before my foot suddenly came down over empty air. I gasped as I fell backwards over the hold in which my impromptu shield came from.

A split-second decision. I had enough sense to think and throw my weight back hard enough, so I landed on the other side, instead of falling into the hole. My back took the brunt of the fall. I winced, rocking back, pulling my legs out of the hole, just as #1 lunged for me.

He leapt over the gap, arms outstretched to crash down on me. For a moment, he looked like a
football player, about the catch the Hail Mary throw of the season, and win the Super Bowl.

In reality, he was an idiot, leaving his entire chest open for me.

I raised my legs further, planted my feet on #1's chest just as it came down to meet me. His hands were inches from my face, fingers splayed, curling, scratching at empty air — before lifting away again, as I launched him up and over my head.

The goon cried out as he flipped over me, arms and legs flailing. He landed on the car behind me, falling hard on his face.

Ha.

I picked myself up, just in time to see Wanda throw her arms out, uttering a cry of frustration. The helicopter was still flying, still shooting, now at Pietro, who darted fast to avoid the spray of bullets.

Wanda was just preparing another throw when Pietro suddenly went down with a cry. It made her turn just as she threw the bolt. "Pietro!"

He was down on one knee — his hands over his thigh, blood spilling. A bullet had caught him. Twenty feet away, I couldn't tell how bad it was, only that he was in pain, and Wanda's anger had just magnified tenfold.

She slapped her hands together with such a force I felt my ears pop — from her fists exploded a bolt so large it knocked Wanda back. The magical energy went wild, expanding the further it got — there was nowhere for the helicopter to go, and it took the blast full-on.

One of its wings burst into flames. A whine filled the air as the engines started to fail, the rotors slapping uselessly together as the helicopter was suddenly sent into a tailspin.

Wanda was already running for Pietro, not even looking as the helicopter veered overhead.

I watched, in silent horror, as it shrieked into the mountainside hundreds of feet over our heads, exploding into a massive ball of smoke, flame, and metal.

*Phweeeeeeewwwww-BOOOM!*

Wanda reached Pietro, helped him up. The agents were still recovering, a little slower. None of them seemed to notice the sheets of snow starting to slip down the mountain beneath the black plume of smoke, where the helicopter had smashed into.

I stood there, awestruck, as the snow fell thicker. It piled and piled, slipping past crevices and trees, gathering in size. Although the train was leaving it fast behind, I realized that the snow was picking up speed.

Oh no.

Wanda, helping Pietro with his arm over her shoulder, had just crossed the last car back to me when she noticed I was staring at something. She and Pietro looked over their shoulders. Something heavy fell across the atmosphere as the same dreadful thought passed through everyone's heads.

A chill silence fell over the air as we all realized the same thing. Pietro cursed loudly.

An avalanche.
Then —

"Run!" I cried.

The first wave of snow and ice spilled over the cliff edge above.

*WHOOOM.*

We turned and broke into a run just as the avalanche slammed onto the end of the train. A massive shudder carried down the length of the locomotive, a long metallic groan as what must have been a hundred tons of snow crashing into it.

Wheels screeched against the rails. Cries filled the air, before abruptly cut off. I risked a glance behind me, just in time to see some of the Komitet agents, much farther behind, disappear under the never-ending wall of ice.

I would've smiled if that same wall of ice wasn't coming for me, too.

The cars started disappearing as the train careened around the corner in the tracks; it disappeared behind the cliff wall, but the avalanche continued to follow us — the snow rushing in from greater heights, stopping for nothing, taking every tree, stone, and rock with it.

Despite every urge screaming at me to run — *run like hell* — I made myself stop and wait for the twins to catch up. Pietro had momentarily forgotten his injury, racing atop the cars, Wanda in the lead, hand in hand. He could've run faster, gone full speed, and not faced the danger of the avalanche, but the bullet had taken that away just when he needed it most.

That's not to say he wasn't fast, especially when he wanted to be. Pietro was still faster than me, and I ended up bringing up the rear as we darted from car to car. The avalanche was practically kissing our heels as we tried to outrun it.

A stitch grew in my side, but I couldn't slow down. Breath heaving, I couldn't take in enough air.

There was this incessant, pounding roar in my ears as I ran. At first, I thought I was the sound of the avalanche, inches from sucking me in. But later I would recognize it as my pulse, nearly deafening me.

There was a loud screech then — *snap!* — the car beneath my feet jolted, and I nearly lost my balance. I caught myself just in time, pushing off again.

A quick glance over my shoulder, and I discovered the source of the disturbance.

The back of the train, beneath all the snow, had been knocked off the track.

I watched, in horror, as the cars descended into the valley below. With it, a massive spray of snow,
sprinkled with the bodies of the agents left behind.

My stomach did flips. More boxcars fell, and that when I realized — they were still connected to the train.

At the same time, I felt car beneath me tilt.

I cried out as my next step fell on thin air, and the car dropped. Its wheels were yanked off the tracks, swinging over the thin edge of the cliff.

I landed harder than I anticipated. A stabbing jolt in my ankles and knees, before I threw myself forward. One last desperate attempt to escape a fall to my death.

I leapt over the gap, reaching for the edge of the next car. My palms slapped against the cold metal — before slipping. I yelped when the car slipped out from my hands, my legs hanging over thin air. My gut yanked up when I went airborne.

This was it. This was the end.

Then a hand appeared. My arm was nearly yanked out of its socket as I was caught. I gasped, my other arm snapping up to scramble for the miracle grip around my wrist.

Pietro's face appeared over the edge of the car. "Hold on! Wanda!"

As soon as he called her name, the train car Pietro was on started to tilt and fall as well — before suddenly bouncing back up into the air.

A loud crack — a flash of red light — and the car I had just jumped from broke away, along with the rest of the fallen train.

But the important part — the engine, the twins and I — were still together and moving. The train kicked forward, picking up speed at the loss of the latter half of its cargo.

The avalanche dropped back ten feet.

The car returned to the tracks with a heavy crash. I almost let slip a sob of relief. Wanda appeared beside Pietro, grabbing my arm and together helping me up.

Shaky legs scrambled on board. My heart was doing jumping jacks and I gasped, remembering to breathe. Wanda said something but I didn't catch it. The avalanche was still coming. Pietro was having trouble getting up. He may have hurt himself, saving me from my fall.

The world was a blur. I was still breathing too hard. But my legs carried me into a standing position, and I didn't lose my balance again. My side had an awful cramp, and I bent over a little, wheezing.

Exhaustion was starting to set in. I could see it in Wanda and Pietro's faces, and I could feel it in my bones. This had gone on too long, and that was about as close to death as I ever wanted to be.

Once more, we kept going, at a slower pace this time. Not quite running now, as the avalanche continued to recede. Either it was losing momentum or the train was gaining speed.

Either way, I felt safe now.

*Bang!*

A bullet ripped through the air right by my head. A second bullet struck Wanda in the arm. She cried
out, went down, and Pietro went down with her.

I whipped around. At the end of what remained of the train was one last man, pulling himself back
up. In his hand, he gripped a pistol — apparently, the avalanche had forced him to draw back on the
last of his arsenal.

Without thinking, I charged at him, catching him before he could fire another shot. I wouldn't let him
hurt the twins again.

I grabbed his gun. I shouldn't have done that. In the attempt to jerk his aim away, to disarm him, the
agent just used it as an opening to strike me in the face. The fist landed hard against my temple.

I went down, stars flashing in front of my eyes.

But that didn't stop me from rolling, avoiding two bullets as they went through the metal roof
beneath. I swept out my legs. The agent dropped, too, and the gun skittered from his hand.

My heart was pounding as I scrabbled for the weapon, trying to reach it first. The agent elbowed me
in the side, in the same place I was struck before. I felt bone crack, but I bit my lip, held in a cry as I
thrust myself forward by the balls of my feet. The agent's hands were inches from the gun.

I kicked him.

He slid a few inches away. His fingers grazed the edge of the weapon's handle.

My hand fell over the barrel.

I ripped it out of his grip, thrusting the gun over my head before the bullet could inadvertently strike
me. But the agent still had the gun, and he grit his teeth as we fought over it — me on my back, him
going up, over me. He was stronger — the initial punch that brought me down was proof of that.

His crushing weight on top of me. I could see the muscles in his face twitching, the narrowing of his
pupils, as he forced the gun lower, between our chests. It was all I could do to keep the gun aimed
away from my body or my face. My hands trembled against the smooth metal. I tried to crush it, the
only thing I could think of, but I didn't have the right torque, not with the constant opposing force
trying to rip it out of my hands.

I didn't expect to be on the losing side so quickly. I had underestimated the damage I'd taken so far,
and how easy it would be for someone to use that against me. The pain in my side was just the start. I
could feel exhaustion starting to set into my bones. The twitching in my overextended and stressed-
out muscles. I couldn't maintain an even control on the gun, even with my grip firmly on it. My
breath came out in short, uneven gasps. I had to keep reminding myself to breathe, to think.

The pain in my side was overwhelming. I gasped, struggled for breath against the stabbing sensation
right next to my lungs. Something had to be broken. I hoped against hope that my lung wouldn't be
punctured again.

But I couldn't. Not when a gun was inches from my face. Not when both of our fingers were over
the trigger.

So instead I pushed.

I didn't know what I was doing, only that I had to keep him from killing me.

The agent wasn't expecting that. Although stronger than me, I myself still had a considerable amount
of super strength on my side. My attempt to kick him off also shifted his stance.

And jerked the gun under his chin.

Without thinking, my hands twitched.

The gun went off.

This was the part where I wanted to black out. But I didn't.

I saw all of it, watched helplessly — transfixed — in torturous slow motion.

The bullet left the chamber in a bright flash. The agent's head jerked back as the bullet entered underneath his jaw, and exited out the top of his head.

My jaw was slack. Warm, sticky blood splattered over me. My hands were hot from the gun, powder on my fingers. I didn't feel it though. My eyes were fixed as the agent tumbled off me. For a second, I swore he was still breathing.

But he lied there, next to me, entirely still, as wind ruffled his hair, and an icy rain started to pelt us. I couldn't take my eyes off the gaping wound just above his neck.

And I just sat there, gun in my hand, frozen with horror.

Then I started to choke. Gagging, I finally peeled my eyes away from the sight, squeezing my eyes shut and hunching over to face the other side, towards the mountain range. I could taste blood in my mouth. Was it his? Was it mine? I'd been hit so hard in the face I couldn't remember anymore.

The metal was still hot in my grip. The only warm thing here now.

A part of me was still in denial. It had been over so quick. That didn't just happen. It was just a movie, with horribly realistic effects. We fought, we struggled, and then it was over. He was dead. My hands still shook from the adrenalin. I could taste the iron tang of blood on my tongue.

And all it took was the pull of the trigger.

My heart still pounded in my chest. Pulse loud in my ears, but I barely registered it. I couldn't look at him. I couldn't look at what I'd done.

Instead, I got up. And walked away.

✮✮✮

I returned to Wanda and Pietro, unable to feel my legs, my face unflinching to the frozen rain pelting my skin. The train car three ahead had its side doors open, and I slipped down inside. In the far back the twins were huddled — Wanda crouched over Pietro, who rested against the back wall, injured leg straightened out before him.

A thick stain of blood had spread across his pants. I stared at that, my stomach doing flips, before noticing that both twins were watching me. I met their gazes with a small jolt; it took me a second to
register their pale faces, their wide eyes, drawing up and down; their fear, palpable.

Fear. Fear of me.

I couldn't comprehend it. Their eyes focused somewhere at my hip. I looked down. I was still holding the gun.

My fingers snapped away immediately. The gun dropped with a dull thud to the floor, and I stepped away from it, heart pounding. I twisted my hand around, stared at my bloody palm, the red spots covering my shirt, my jeans.

What had I done?

I looked back at the twins. They had relaxed, just a fraction. But I could see the look in their eyes. I didn't have to tell them what happened.

Wanda's voice shook a little, uncertain. "A-are you okay?"

I blinked at her. It took three whole seconds for me to register what she said, and in that time my gaze slipped away, wandering to the open door, the blinding white square in a cold black box. My thoughts were fleeting, soft and wispy, breaking apart and spinning away like flakes of ice.

I wandered to the door, voice a cracked whisper. "I think...I need to sit down."

The words had barely left my mouth when my legs practically crumbled beneath me. My muscles were jelly, and my knees smacked the wood with a hard thump. Arms limp at my sides, I wanted to stare into the outside, into the blinding wintry glare, until I couldn't see anymore. Until my whole world turned white, and I couldn't feel any of it.

I kept seeing that man's face in my head. At the exact second the gun went off. His expression was something I didn't think I could ever forget.

The surprise. The fear.

Before the life died from his eyes. Pupils dilating. Muscles slacking, jaw falling open, before he fell out of my vision.

A shudder passed down my spine. My finger twitched against the floor. It still felt like I was holding the trigger.

I felt cold, but it wasn't the weather. It was a kind of cold where you wondered if you'd ever feel warm again. Maybe never.

"Amelia?" A probing whisper invaded my thoughts. I looked up, caught off guard by Wanda standing next to me. I hadn't heard her approach. There was a frown on her lips, something flickering in her eyes. "Are you okay?"

I realized I hadn't answered her the first time. I still didn't know what I could say. None of the words in my head made much sense to me. I looked back down again, running my hand over the wood floor, tracing the knots by my foot. My words were barely a mumble. "I thought I could escape it, Wanda. I thought I could escape from what the Crucible did to me."

"What do you mean?" Wanda asked, coming to kneel beside me. "Escape from what?"

"From what they made me." I said, unable to look at her. "What they turned me into. I wanted to
prove Brandt wrong. But it turns out…I'm just like her. I'm just like the rest of them. A monster. A killer."

"Amelia," Wanda said softly, kneeling down in front of me, hands lying in her lap. I picked up my head, trying not to flinch as I met her hazel eyes, her face blurring behind my tears. "Amelia, you are not that person. I know you well, I have looked into your head a thousand times. There is something pure there…like a golden, shining wall, protecting you. Something that the Chairman could never destroy." I sniffed, bitterness in my voice. "And it's still there? How can it still be shining after what I did?"

"It has only dimmed, not gone," Wanda said, tilting her head and closing her eyes. I wondered if that was her, picking through my thoughts. I couldn't feel it, and idly wondered if that meant she wasn't doing anything. As soon as it occurred to me, a small smile alighted upon Wanda's lips, and she opened her eyes again. "No, I am not doing anything to your thoughts, Amelia. Not without your permission."

I've had my suspicions about the true extent of Wanda's powers, and after Brandt's accusation right before the skirmish, I had reserved the benefit of the doubt for Wanda. I wasn't angry at her, though — I was too angry at myself at the moment. But having those thoughts confirmed, that Wanda was really psychic? Well, it was kind of a relief. It was one less mystery I had to worry about.

I nodded dumbly, wiping away at my face as I considered those words. Not just the fact of having my trust in her reconfirmed, but what her promise really meant. "So…if I asked again, you could make me forget. Like you did to me in the forest."

Wanda's smile froze, before falling off her face. She looked away, biting her lip. "Yes, I could, if that was what you wanted."

I wasn't worried that she'd ever control my mind, or make me do something I didn't want to do. That was the exact thing we've been running from. No, I trusted Wanda. Still.

"But you don't want to," I guessed from her demeanor. For whatever reason, Wanda seemed apprehensive to do something like that again. As it was, I wasn't too sure about it myself, but the possibility was tempting at the moment.

"No," Wanda admitted, bowing her head before picking it up to look at me again, her brow knitted together. She started playing with her fingers as she continued, "I do not know how to remove memories entirely. I do not think it would be good if I did, and I don't want to do that to you. I…I only blocked your memories, from the Crucible. The wall in your head makes it difficult to do anything to begin with. And even then, as you have already shown us, the effect is wearing off. Slowly, perhaps, but my power is not forever. And it is hurting you."

She sighed, and I could hear the pain and guilt in her words. Before I could say anything however, Wanda leaned forward and took my hands in hers, and her gaze was earnest as she met my eyes again. "But I will do it, if you really want me to. You are my friend, and I want you to be happy. Be at peace. I just want you to be sure first."

Could I do that to myself again? Maybe. All I wanted right now was to rip the memory of killing that man from my head. It was just playing on repeat, and I was afraid I'd never be rid of it. Would I go crazy from this? I was a lot of things, but I never considered myself a…a murderer.
That was a line you just didn't cross. I could never come back from that. "Maybe… I don't know. It feels wrong, somehow."

Wanda thought this over a moment, tilting her head. "I know Pietro and I are not normal. We view death differently from you. Killing is sometimes… its sometimes necessary for us. But I understand that it must have been… difficult for you to end that man's life."

"Except it wasn't," I said, letting out a short, ironic laugh, although there was nothing funny about it. "It wasn't hard at all. Killing him was so… it was easy. Too easy."

I shook my head, swallowing at the bile rising in my throat. "I can't do that again. I won't."

"I would never ask you of that," Wanda said, shaking her head. "If there is one thing I have learned in the short time I have been on this earth, it is that sometimes, good people must do bad things, for the right reasons. It is not an easy burden. But it is one we must carry, so that others don't have to."

The notion was only mildly comforting. Burden was the correct word for this. I'd have to carry the weight of this for the rest of my life. People wouldn't look at me the same, knowing I'd willingly taken the life of another.

My head hurt. The gunshot still echoed in my ears, a death knell. "And what if I'm not strong enough?"

Wanda bit her lip, glanced away. "We cross that bridge when we get there, yes? One day at a time."

It took me a moment to realize she was echoing my words from a few days ago, and I gave her a small smile. Wanda returned the look with one final nod, before standing up and returning to Pietro, who seemed to have gone into a small stupor.

I went back to tracing the woodwork. I was severely tempted by Wanda's offer, to erase my mind again. I knew well enough she could do it, but was it a good idea? Never mind if it was the right thing to do; could I survive without the proper memories? Wanda herself said she wasn't necessarily good at it — what if she took away more memories than intended? What if I was sent back to the first square, like waking up in the forest, thinking it was still September and not knowing anything of how I got here?

I didn't want to go through the process of understanding myself, the Crucible, the super soldiers and the mutants. Over the course of a week, I could consider it all somewhat easily — but learning it all again would be a chore. It would slow us down. Would I even want to go home the second time?

And what would I do, if this hypothetical amnesiac me of the future found out that past-me got rid of my memories out of a crushing guilt? Of an unforgivable crime?

Would she think I was weak? Would she be stronger? Or would she just make the same choice again, and start this endless cycle of guilt and blind innocence?

I had killed that man. How could I make myself forget that? It was awful. But I learned something very important about myself.

I could kill. I could kill anyone, easily. But it wouldn't get easier. I'd crossed the line, and I wasn't going to do it again if I could help it.

It was a minor epiphany. It didn't absolve me of the guilt, nor did it shake the cold that had settled somewhere deep inside of me. I would still have to live, knowing that the Crucible had done irrevocable damage to me. I would live keeping this secret. How could I let anyone else besides the
twins know about this? When I finally got home, I couldn't conceive the notion of telling Mom or Peter or anyone that I had killed someone.

I couldn't.

A soft gasp to right and my attention snapped to the twins. I'd forgotten they were here. I blinked rapidly, suddenly away of my sore knees, numb feet, and wondered how long I had been sitting there. It had only seemed like a few minutes, but my muscles protested as if they hadn't been used in hours.

Then I saw what Wanda was doing and something in my mind clicked, and I jolted forward, throwing out a hand to stop her. "No, no, don't make a tourniquet yet! If he's not bleeding out, then he'll only lose his leg."

"Wanda!" Pietro threw a startled look at her, who gasped and ripped her hands away from the cloth she'd been using to tie around his thigh. "How am I supposed to run with only one leg?!"

She threw her hands over her mouth. "Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know —!"

"It's fine," I said, not registering the panic in her tone. I dropped down on Pietro's other side, taking a finger a pulling the cloth away from the wound. It was too messy to see what was going on. "Not everyone knows that. Wanda, I need water, salt, and bandages, if you can find them in here. It doesn't look like his femoral artery was severed, which is good." I cast a wan smile at Pietro. "You'll live."

He knocked his head back, relieved. "Oh, thank god."

Wanda had gotten up and started a quick search through the crates around us. It was a little more crowded in here than our last boxcar hideout, but enough to keep us sheltered from the cold. Wanda sped up the process by blasting boxes open with her magic. Wood splinters flew into the air, until finally: "Aha!"

Wanda skidded back to Pietro's side, practically throwing the metal water bottle at my face. I just barely caught it. In her hands, she carried the other ingredients I asked — a package of fresh gauze and a whole sack of unprocessed salt. Offhand, I wondered how much that would be worth in Sokovia. Snapping open the lid, I said, "Wanda, hold out the pant leg, please."

She did so, and I held the bottle over Pietro's leg, and slowly tilted it over. Pietro grunted, shifting slightly as the water poured over his skin. The blood, a little tacky, thinned away, revealing the wound embedded in Pietro's skin. In surprise, I said, "What? It's already healing!"

"Accelerated regeneration," Pietro said with a little shrug, although he was smirking. "Or so those KGB scientists say."

"Uh-huh." I said, throwing him a skeptical look, then back at the wound. Normally, something like this would've made me squeamish, but after what just happened….no, I couldn't think about it. "Well, you better hope it doesn't heal with the bullet still inside. We'll have to check and make sure."

Ripping open the hole wider in the pantleg, I carefully traced my fingers against the side of Pietro's leg, guessing at the path the bullet must've taken. No sooner had I started to check, however, did Pietro flinch with a loud yelp.


"You have cold hands." Pietro slumped back, giving me a chagrined smile.
I cut him a glare, unamused, before returning to the task at hand. Pietro was skin, bone, and muscle — he always said he had to eat a lot, but it was my personal opinion that he wasn't eating enough. There were Olympic sprinters with more body fat than him.

His skin was slick with water and blood, but I felt no alien objects underneath. As it was, we didn't have the tools to remove any bullet fragments. If there were any, they would have to remain in Pietro's leg. Considering everything had happened, that could've happened, a few pieces of metal in his body wasn't going to be a big deal.

And if it did?

I took a deep breath, released it. Well. One day at a time.

"The bullet went clean through," I said finally, with some relief, after finding the entry wound at the back his leg. It was deceptively small; Pietro had been shot from behind, perhaps with a handgun. "I think it'll be fine. Just clean the wound and some bandaging and pressure, and your body will do the rest. Wanda, the salt?"

She handed me the burlap sack, and I ripped open the top. With another water bottle, I took a handful of salt and carefully funneled it into the narrow top of the bottle. Then closing it, I shook the bottle, making sure it was mixed well before tossing the bottle back to Wanda. "Can you heat this up? We need to sterilize it first."

Wanda nodded once, and her eyes flared red. The bottle rose in the air, suspended by flickering tendrils wafting from her fingers. I could hear the faint sound of water boiling, and plucked the bottle from suspension. "Thanks," I said, before pouring the contents back onto Pietro's leg.

Pietro flinched in anticipation, but relaxed as the salt water washed over his leg. In surprise, he remarked, "It…it doesn't sting."

"Of course not, it's saline, it's a disinfectant," I said without looking up. I'd seen enough movies of rugged badass heroes pouring their flask of whiskey onto bullet wounds, that it was one of the dumbest things you could do with that kind of injury, especially when other, safer options were available. "Homemade, sure, but the amount of salt is supposed to match the pH levels in your blood."

Wanda frowned at me. "What's pH?"

"A content's acidic level. Pure water is neutral, so it only stings a little. Saline is about point nine percent sodium chloride, which matches it to a human body's salinity levels. Like your tears, they're salty, right? Therefore, saline doesn't sting. The answer rolled off my tongue as easily as if it had been a teacher asking me that in Science class. Huh. Who knew that knowledge would have such applicability in the field? Especially this field.

"And sodium chloride is…" Wanda pursed her lips. "Salt?"

"Exactly."

"Ah!" Wanda smiled, pleased to understand. Then she tilted her head. "How do you know all of this, Amelia?"

"I spent a lot of time in hospitals growing up," I explained, not really thinking about it as I rolled up two gauze pads, dabbed them lightly in saline, before placing them on either side of Pietro's leg. Wanda helped me wrap the gauze around. "A lot of time in bed, sick, with nothing to do but read my mom's old nursing textbooks. I never thought I'd end up using that stuff later. At least not like this."
"So, your mother is a nurse," Pietro said, with a curious smile.

I paused in the middle of tying the gauze into its finishing knot. I glanced up once at Pietro, then away again, the cold guilt rising in my gut.

My tone was curt. "No."

And with that, I got up and walked away.

The thought of my mother, her memory and broken dreams, was a stab to the gut, opening an old wound. And with Pietro taken care of, my mind was now free to wander where it shouldn't.

I had ruined Mom's life, just by existing. And now? I ended another life. I killed someone. I felt like a living, breathing curse.

I settled back down in my corner again, closing my eyes, forcing my thoughts to drift, drift away from all of that. Instead, I listened to the rumble of the train-tracks, the whistling wind, the murmurs of the twin's conversation, and let it lull me to a dreamless sleep.

✮✮✮

Three days later, we entered France.

The ride there had been anxious and boring. Absolutely nothing remarkable happened — no more attacks, no more surprises, but Wanda, Pietro and I were all on edge, just waiting for the worst to happen. The train had stopped that first night, when the train's crewmen took a gander at the destruction. They had lost nearly half of their cargo, but any signs of the fighting or stowaways were long gone. Wanda magicked the men's attention away from us when they came to our car — their eyes glazed over us, huddled in the corner, as if we weren't even there, before moving on.

It was impressive. Also, a little frightening.

There was nothing the conductor could do about the lost shipments, so they just kept going. We finally left the mountains on the evening of the second day. The morning of the third, the three of us woke up to sunny grape fields and the warm French Riviera, with its Italian-esque terracotta rooftops and narrow streets.

And the food. So much food.

The train came to a stop in the center of a little town. The side of its battered cars drew a lot of gazes and scratching heads, so it took a little more magic and ingenuity to jump off unseen. I couldn't believe how warm it was when we stepped out into sunlight — I shed my coat, relishing the sensation of actually being somewhere.

Well, I had no idea what the name of the town was, but still.

Our stomachs were practically growling, so we followed the smells down to the market. We gazed around in silent curiosity — the twins' eyes were wide with wonder. It took me a moment to remember they'd never been outside their country before — perhaps never seen the outside of Novi Grad or the Crucible in their entire lives. I, at least, had the benefit of seeing New Jersey and D.C. a few times in my life. Not exactly exotic locales (debatable, regarding New Jersey), but still. I hadn't
been locked up.

I myself wasn't exactly feeling very talkative, either. None of us had spoken of the Komitet attack since it happened, which was just fine by me. I wasn't a fan of talking about my feelings, and I had no intent on sharing my debilitating introspection of murder with Wanda and Pietro. I was sure they were worried about me, but I figured if I put on a brave face and kept it to myself, it'd be fine. I could carry this burden on my own. Don't let them see your fear.

I found myself taking in every little detail — the loving cursive of hand-written chalk signs, the laughter echoing out of windows overhead, children in the streets, with dolls, trucks, and cell-phones. Actual cell-phones. I'd forgotten those things even existed. The French were alarmingly friendly, considering the downtrodden Sokovian people we'd just left behind, and I was a little intimidated by the looks we got. Some were suspicious, but most were just curious; vendors trying to sell their wares. Fresh breads and wines and oh-my-god was that cheesecake? It was such a culture shock that the bright colors and happy faces were almost an assault on the eyes.

But we didn't have money. I was still trying to figure out how we were going to get food, with the dreadful thought that we'd probably have to steal or mind-trick these nice people, before Wanda grabbed my arm, startling me.

"Amelia, look!"

She was pointing at a newsstand. The cashier was half-asleep under the awning, hat pulled low over his eyes as he reclined in his seat. I was nearly dragged over to the kiosk, trying to figure out what Wanda was pointing at.

Pietro, standing (his leg had healed remarkably, although he seemed a little anxious to test himself) right next to it, had a magazine in hand. I didn't get what the big deal was. At first, I thought they were just marveling at the glossy paper — there was a notable lack of international news magazines in Sokovia, and it wouldn't surprise me if this was the twins first run-in with them.

But I quickly found out that wasn't the case.

Pietro held it up, jaw hanging in a half-grin. "Look, Amelia! You're famous!"

I nearly ripped it out of his hands, unable to believe my eyes. The front cover photo was me in Novi Grad, Sokovia.

I remembered the moment clearly in my mind — I had just stepped out from behind my cover, standing on top of some fallen rubble, standing over the heads of everyone else. Back straight, shoulders back. Seeing it from a different point of view was so bizarre. I looked like that? It had to be someone else, someone who looked braver, who looked so photogenic in a candid shot.

But it wasn't anyone else.

Billowing black smoke, from burning cars and homemade cocktails, framed me, making it appear I had just walked out of a fire — unscathed. My back was to the camera, face turned away. Yellow raincoat, distinctive, catching the eye, impossible not to notice. Red-and-white scarf billowing in the wind. In my arm, the busted shield I had picked up.

And in the background, the Cheka tanks rolling in.

I gaped. I was on the cover of TIME magazine.
Art by me :D

(IVE BEEN PLANNING THIS COVER SINCE MARCH 2016 GAH)
The Young Rebellion: A Brief Look into the State of Sokovia

By Julia Frink

They seem to emerge from thin air, nowhere and everywhere at once. At first, shambling, silent in their little patrol. Then, growing bigger, they start to chant. They call for freedom. They call for what is rightfully theirs.

The citizens of Novi Grad have made their demands; to be seen by the State, to be heard. The markets are closed today, not that they ever had much food to begin with. Every day is a struggle here. Jobs are difficult to find, and the ones you do, they pay meager wages — hardly enough to feed yourself, much less a family.

All the phones are tapped, although the media pretends it trusts its people. Connection to the Internet is a laughable endeavor; Sokovian citizens have access to exactly three websites, and two are owned by the State. The third is the rudimentary email system. Needless to say, the State can see that, too. Technology is rudimentary here. I have not seen a single smart-phone. The latest cell is a prepaid Nokia flip-phone from 2002.

And these people are tired. They are sick of the constant surveillance. It's a common joke amongst friends. How do you know the Cheka are spying on you? There's a new cabinet in your house.

The Cheka, Sokovia's militant police force inherited from the Soviet Union, have quarantined the city. The people have had enough. They rise up. They stand together. They march to the gates, at a scale that rivals the D.C. Mutant Rights march of 1982. It seems the entire city has crawled out of the darkness. They greatly outnumber the police force here, but they are still underpowered.

It is illegal for a citizen of Sokovia to own a gun. Even the hunting and farming communities must go through massive bureaucracy just in order to continue their lifestyle. The people have no way to protect themselves from crime and danger — they must rely on the State, who have already decided that the safety of one person, of any lowly citizen, is not their primary concern. Crime is serious problem, especially in the cities. The State are never there to stop it from happening. People die every day, because they have no means to protect themselves, either from each other, or the suspicious Cheka, who'd rather shoot first and ask questions later.

To be found with a gun means life in prison. These people have no concept of gun safety — no gun knowledge at all, except maybe how to shoot one.

Because I see them here, I see the weapons hidden in belts and under jackets. They
crouch along the rooftops, a shambling militia protecting their families, because no one else will. If this goes south, then they will never see the light of Day again. It is also illegal to hold protests, gatherings without permission. The rights the West have known for so long, that they have taken for granted, don't exist here. These people are risking everything for what may be an ill-gotten dream.

If there is one thing a Sokovian knows how to do well, it is how to hide. Guns. Money. Food. People. It is the only reason I and my colleague, Frank Crain, have remained hidden here for so long. Sokovia has had closed borders for over a decade, and our presence here is in direct defiance of their laws. If we were caught, we would be kept prisoners — political chess pieces in a world that has recently shown us to be far more complex than we ever could have imagined.

Not that anyone here really understands that. Media is restricted. The people only know what the State wants them to know. Whenever I mention the Avengers, I get blank looks. When I say 'the Battle of Manhattan', no one knows what I'm talking about. These people have no idea that we are no longer alone in this universe. That there are others out there, these so-called superheroes, who saved the world.

This world, the world of Sokovia, has remained unchanged. The Avengers have no reach here. Even if Sokovians could appreciate the gravity of the Battle of Manhattan, they would not be grateful. They are the forgotten people. Europe has pulled out of the 20th century, they have risen from the ashes of Communist control. Sokovia was left behind. The Sokovians have not forgotten that. They have not seen or interacted with the outside world for almost an entire generation.

The State cannot protect them anymore. They were never here to protect Sokovia. They hunt their own people, in search for elusive foreigners and American spies.

I thought it was mere paranoia, when the first call went out, ordering people to stay in their homes. That an American spy had been discovered, had attacked the Cheka. At first, I thought our cover was blown, so we joined the protests in order to hide ourselves. I had no idea the rumors were true — that there were indeed other foreigners, hiding amongst us.

The march was eventually stopped at the city gates. Novi Grad is surrounded by a massive wall, not unlike the Berlin Wall, and the Cheka guard the largest exit out of the city. The people gather and fill in, packing the square, until there is barely any room left to breathe. I nearly lose track of Crain a few times, but we managed to stick together. We watch as the front line engages the Cheka, yelling and shouting, trying to push their way through. But the Cheka won't give, their shields rising in a phalanx, and they fend off attackers with batons. I see a soldier preparing tear gas in the far back, and I grew anxious.

As it turned out, I never had to worry about tear gas. It was the bullets that were far more dangerous.

I don't know where or how it started. The only thing I saw is single stone, flying through the air. It struck the captain of the guard right above his ear. He had a gun in his hand, had been pointing at someone in the crowd. He never got to fire a shot.

Either way, he fell, blood coating his face. The Cheka recoil in alarm. Someone shouts. A gun goes off.
Suddenly, it's a stampede. People at the front of the line rush at the sound, turn and run. But it's crushing here, and the panic spreads too fast — the march is rendered into a stampede as the civilians' scatter, screaming as the Cheka continue to fire into the crowd.

Then it turns into a riot.

It's utter chaos in moments. Frank pulls me out of the way just in time — a Molotov cocktail lands just where my feet had been seconds ago. Had I not been moved, I would've gone up in flames.

We run for cover as bullets rip through the air, being pushed and shoved as people churn every which way. Some fight, some run, but the Cheka are now charging at us. Frank and I are unarmed. If we get caught in this, I doubt our chances of survival.

We find tenuous safety behind an old shop. The walls are riddled with scars of old battles and wars — a fact that you can't easily tell, now that another raged around us. I nearly catch a chip of broken brick in my eye, and mortar sprays into my hair. As I throw myself around the corner and cover my head, I can hear a clicking noise — its Frank, maintaining his duty as photographer, catching as much action as he can without endangering himself. Although I feel, at this point, the point is moot. We are in far more danger than we ever bargained for.

Foreign correspondents often risk life and limb when reporting in dangerous areas, but I have no training on war journalism. I do not know, besides the most basic of tactics, of what to do in situations like these. I am not an active participant, nor would I dream of joining a fight — as a reporter, it's my duty to record and report as objectively as possible, gather as much information I can. Surviving this is the only way I can ensure this news will reach the outside world.

Still, we remain unharmed. If anyone sees us, they seem uninterested in targeting us. The Cheka, at least, have their hands full with the persistent and furious populace, who turn out to be much better equipped than they anticipated. As we watch, several individuals stand out from the crowd, three people who seem to tear through the square with inhuman ability.

I have had the honor of speaking to one of these revolutionaries, a young blonde girl who never gave me her name, but didn't hesitate to pick up a fallen shield and step up, forming the thin line between the Sokovian people and the attacking Cheka. It is a kind of courage, bravery you don't see very often, especially not in someone so young. But that is what Sokovia has done to the people here — it has turned men to slaves, and children to warriors.

Crain and I watched in amazement as the girl stood directly in front of those tanks, the line of infantry marching in — before proceeding to take them apart, one by one. It is not until she disables the second tank do I realize: she is special. By that, I mean, the girl has superhuman abilities, enhanced qualities that allow her to take a blow from a man twice her size and not go down. How she never seems to run out of breath, reflexes bordering on recognizance, strength beyond what any person — male, female, adult or child — should be capable of.

My initial thought is that she must be a Mutant. Crain even suggests it, considering that the blonde girl is not the only enhanced human on the battlefield. There are two others — also teenagers, almost adults, with their own unique set of abilities. The boy, in a blue tracksuit, darts in and out of my vision. I see only glimpses of him, before he
disappears again, leaving a shimmering silver streak in his wake. He moves in and out around enemies, slippery as quicksilver.

The other, a dark-haired girl with flashing scarlet eyes. Her fingers bend and twist in an almost grotesque manner, as she renders vehicles into balls of unrecognizable scrap metal, sends Cheka soldiers flying into the air. I have no idea what to call it, short of magic. Others run away from her, crying with unimaginable panic. Others collapse, curl up on the ground in a fetal position, screaming as some invisible force inflicts pain onto them. The Cheka shout accusations at her: "Witch! Witch!" I consider it a fitting term.

I would later confirm that they are likely Mutants.

But the blonde girl in the yellow, who I've dubbed Rebel in order to preserve her identity, she's different. Before the tanks arrived, she spotted us behind our cover, an abandoned building. Without hesitating she ran over, dodging hail fire, just to reach us. She shouts at us, with a level of command and anger that you only hear in adults — so at first, I'm confused as to how old she really is. I initially pinned her at about eighteen to twenty years of age — you can imagine my surprise when she tells me she's only fifteen.

I was baffled by her accent. Rebel's Sokovian is near flawless, but we startled each other when we all realize the other can speak English. In fact, Rebel is from America. An American teenager in Sokovia? At this point, nothing else could surprise me.

It's through Rebel that I gather key pieces of information. I learned more in the five minutes we spoke, than the months I've already spent here in Novi Grad, hiding. Very few people outside of Sokovia even know the Chairman exists, much less in control of the entire nation. A mysterious man who lives in a grand fortress called the Crucible, hidden away in the Black Diamond mountains — notorious for its endless winter weather.

When I ask her how she managed to get so far from home, Rebel says she's been kidnapped by the Chairman, but managed to escape. Like us, she intends to leave Sokovia and return home. There is no doubt in her eyes.

I can't help but note the slight stutter in her voice, although she doesn't seem nervous or afraid. Perhaps just a speech impediment. The charming spray freckles on Rebel's face only further hammer in how young she is.

For my part, I do try to catch her name; surely the American government would like to know one of their citizens was unlawfully taken from their home. But when the fighting is done, she leaves before I convince her; in retrospect, I feel that this was wise of her. I doubt she understands the full impact of her actions on that day in Sokovia, and how it will affect the rest of the world.

"There are other people after us," Rebel tells me. "Agents of the Chairman […] they won't hesitate to kill you if you get in their way."

After everything that has happened, I believe her. Crain and I take off in a different direction than the young freedom-fighters. Our journey is a rough one, fraught with peril and risk of capture. While Novi Grad has been liberated, the Cheka have already begun mobilizing — they are greater in number than most of the rebelling citizens. They patrol the roads we take. Tanks and helicopters take off to neighboring towns and cities, who have begun in their own riots, after hearing what happened in their capital city.
At first, Crain and I walk, along with dozens of other citizens, now armed with guns and weaponry taken off of fallen Chekists. One drives by in a commandeered Jeep, dressed in a stolen uniform; the man knows we are reporters, that we are foreigners, and insists we hitch a ride. Crain and I are hesitant, but after a moment we agree.

It was a wise decision. Soon, the Jeep comes upon a checkpoint, manned by real Chekists, who are investigating every vehicle that comes their way. There is a line of cars to the left — all civilians are stopped, and I don't see any able to go through. The driver tells us to hide in the compartment beneath the trunk bed, and Crain and I do so. It is cramped and dark, a metal coffin; we listen to the muffled voices outside, hear the footsteps as an officer walks around the Jeep, inspecting it. I hear the trunk door open, and I'm sure, I'm so sure that we are to be discovered, that we're done for. If the officer sees the handle on the floor of the trunk, if he pulls away the rug and the extra cans, he will become curious, and investigate.

There is a long, heavy pause. Then the trunk door slams shut and I hear gravel crunch as the officer walks away.

Crain lets out a sigh of relief. I actually hit him, because I'm terrified the sound alone will give us away.

But we are not discovered, and pass through the checkpoint uninhibited. Crain and I remain hidden until we hear a knock over our heads, and the hatch lifts up. The disguised man grins at us, clearly pleased with his work. He introduces himself as Sergei. We're only a day away from the border, he tells us. He can take us there, but after that, we must find our own way. The man has his own family to take care of, and he is going to return to fetch them, before escaping Sokovia.

We agree to this plan, not knowing what else to do. I fear going on our own, knowing that we will not be as well protected. I have little self-defense knowledge, and while Crain knows how to use a gun, he's never killed anyone. I don't want to ask him to take on such a burden now.

There are three more checkpoints. The first two go smoothly, although I'm as nervous hiding as I was the first time we slipped away. The last checkpoint, however, something goes wrong.

Being locked in the trunk, I'm not quite sure what happened. The inspection seems to go smoothly at first, with Sergei sounding amiable and complying to the Chekist officer. But then their voices raise, an argument, a shout. Then a gun fired.

Its returned tenfold, and I cry out as bullets riddle the sides of the car. It's armored, and none come through — something I am only aware of after the fact. Terrified, Crain and I cling to each other as a firefight raged outside. More guns arrive, I think. I believe Sergei has brought back-up, perhaps more rebels hiding, following through the woods. The Cheka are unprepared for the attack.

It lasts only for a few minutes, although it feels like an eternity. When it suddenly goes silent, I wonder if something terrible has happened. We must have lost. The Chekists outnumber us, and the rebels are badly armed. Would they have the right manpower to even take down an entire checkpoint?

I get my answer soon enough. A knock comes to the hatch. My heart practically leaps into my throat. Slowly, Crain pushes it up, and we peer out.
Sergei, his face bloody, stares at us, victorious. He laughs at our expressions. "Look at you, pale as ghosts!" he says, cackling, and I spot Sokovian rebels milling about behind him, checking the fallen bodies of the Cheka soldiers. "Scared we might lose, yes?"

I was wrong. The civilians far outnumber the police force. They must have come across a weapons cache, because each one is armed with assault rifles, many with back-up pistols and batons.

They are better prepared than I thought.

Sergei proceeds as promised, and takes us to the border. We no longer have to hide now; Crain and I ride in the back of the Jeep, surrounded by an envoy of more stolen vehicles. The Sokovians are mobilizing so quickly — I wonder how many of them were prepared for this. The riot in Novi Grad had seemed so spontaneous and chaotic, I couldn't possibly conceive it as planned. And yet here they are, these rebels, looking as though they've been thinking about doing this for years.

Then again, perhaps they have, and had merely been waiting for the opportune moment.

The border arrives almost too quickly. The rebels prepare themselves, expecting an army of Cheka waiting for them at the border gates, ready to fight off and kill escaping Sokovians. But they lower their guns in surprise when we round the corner, and discover the gates abandoned.

The downside to the rebellion is a lack of communication — frequent, at least. They rely on short-wave radios to contact each other, and information hardly seems up-to-date. The concept of 24-news, of instant, up-to-date relays seems alien in a country that is decades behind the rest of the world.

But rebellions have succeeded in the past, without the need for Internet or cell phones. This appears to be no different. Despite a lack of technology, the Sokovians are still quick and clear in their relay of messages. Most of it I don't understand — they speak in code, in case any Chekists are listening in.

We drive through the border unhindered.

We have reached Slovenia.

The Slovene border guard are twenty meters down the road, and I have to say, they look quite surprised to see us. At first, they are wary at the approach of Chekist vehicles, but their attitude changes when they see that the men and women riding in them are dressed casually, only a few in uniforms. We stop when they tell us — the Sokovians are not interested in making enemies.

The Slovenes are the first to learn of the Sokovian riots, of the rebellion spreading across the country. From there, the message spreads.

It begins with one of the patrolmen who, ordered by his commanding officer, runs off to make some phone calls. The Slovene officer can speak passing Sokovian; the Sokovians themselves can't speak any other language aside from their own. When Sergei introduces Frank Crain and I to the man, the officer surprises us with his English. He's greatly concerned by this news of unrest in Sokovia, but he is willing to help us. Luckily, Crain and I brought our passports.
From there, it is smooth sailing. Crain and I jump off the Jeep, and the envoy turns around. The Slovene guards relax considerably when they leave, and two usher us onto another vehicle, taking us to the nearest station. This land, in Slovenia, looks no different than Sokovia, but there are not enough words to express my relief at the change of flags, the national colors, the sight of cell phones and Mac computers in the offices. Passing through the building, we pass a wall covered in clocks, one for each time zone. It's 8:34 PM in London.

We meet with the Major in charge; his office is neat, and I stare at his laptop, almost unable to recognize it. His English is smoother, and has just gotten off the phone when we enter. Without saying a word, he hands the phone to me.

Not knowing what else to do, I take it, bringing the receiver to my ear.

On the other side, a female voice speaks. "Good evening, Miss Julia Frink."

The woman sounds old, but she doesn't sound soft. Her voice is prim and stern, politer than I expected. And yet I recognized her instantly.

I cover my move, nearly drop to my knees. Crain catches me before I fall. He says, "Julia, what's wrong? What is it?"

I look up at him and whisper: "It's the bloody Queen of England!"

Her Majesty continues on the other line, as though she hadn't heard me (I certainly hope she hadn't). "Pardon my intrusion to your wonderful escapades, but the head of MI6 has just informed me of two British reporters having been rescued from Sokovia. Is this true?"

I am nearly breathless as I answer. "Y-yes, your Majesty. I, I mean we, Frank Crain and I, we've been in Sokovia for the past year, recording the conditions for the citizens leaving here. We were only planning on a quiet return, to bring with us our findings."

"But, as I understand it, things turned out a little differently."

"Yes, your Majesty. The people are rioting. I fear we may have a war on our hands."

"Well, thankfully, it's not your responsibility anymore. I want you back in London immediately. My Minister of Defence will ensure you safe passage. Good day, Miss Frink. Say hello to Mr. Crain for me."

And the phone-call ends. Frank is staring at me. I blink back at him. "The Queen says hello."

It all seems too much, too soon. Just earlier today I witnessed three super-powered individuals lay waste to an entire platoon of Chekists. I've seen the Sokovian people take the country by force, faster than anything I've ever seen. And now, I've just spoken to the Queen of England. The fact that she knows my name nearly makes my heart stop.

In two hours, we are on a chartered flight to France — apparently, there was some confusion, so instead of a straight flight to London, we stop and catch another in Paris. The Queen was not happy about this, according to Minister Hawthorn, who greeted us after we departed Heathrow airport.

Stepping out onto familiar soil, I wanted to collapse and never get up again. I would've
fallen asleep right on the tarmac if I could have, but I doubt that would have been very fitting of me. The sight of London, of Westminster, of Big Ben, of the Bridge — it finally gets me. Frank holds onto me as I start to bawl my eyes out like a little schoolgirl.

We are ushered into a dark SUV and escorted to a private hotel. I thought they would take us home — my apartment is just in Chelsea, I try to explain, but the Minister, who sits opposite us inside the vehicle, explains that it's not safe for us in our homes yet. It is unknown of our identities are wanted by the Sokovian government, if they seek to do us harm, and for now, it is better safe than sorry.

But in my gut, I know that is not entirely true, a thought confirmed later, when we are interviewed and debriefed by the Minister and his colleagues. We give them everything we know, and he advises us of the media storm about to hit us, and what we should and shouldn't tell the world. England is wary of releasing such sensitive information about a potentially-hostile country, especially when Mutants are involved. It is a well-known fact that there are still strong anti-Mutant sentiments still in the UK, despite the UN accords having been signed. The Mutant Registration Act is still a highly controversial topic.

It's a harsh reminder of the 20th century and all our past mistakes; the Cuban missile crisis, the Mutant Civil Rights movement, the Paris accords and near assassination of President Nixon. Threats of rogue Mutants haven't haunted us in centuries, but now they have returned. Telling the world that there are two very powerful teenage mutants out there, fighting in revolutions, is not something many are happy to hear.

But hear it they must.

Since returning to London, my home, the events of Sokovia have earned a multitude of names. The Sokovian Riots, the November Revolution, the Underground Liberation. However, I find the most fitting to be the People's Uprising — for it was people I saw, regular citizens who fought and died for their freedom, striking out against an oppressive regime, and forever changing the history of Sokovia. There have been uprisings before, but this one has maintained a life that is frankly unprecedented.

The Respublika will not be able to suppress the people this time. They cannot suppress the outrage the world bears for them. Sokovia will not be forgotten.


"Yo, Pete, have you seen this?" Ned called, running up to catch up with Peter in the hall. They were joining the ambling rush to lunch, and Peter turned to see Ned waving the latest TIME magazine in his hand. The cover was almost as bold as Ned's hand-crafted Avengers screen-print t-shirt — designed by yours truly in Midtown's print shop. The design turned out to be surprisingly popular, and so far, Peter had made about fifty bucks selling those to other kids in school.

"Yeah, I saw that this morning," Peter replied, taking the magazine in hand. Ned was a little out of breath, and he heard a few jeering calls down the hall from Flash, but two boys ignored him.
wasn't afraid to stick up for him, but recently he learned to pick his battles. Unless Flash started getting aggressive, Peter was going to play it cool. He'd defended Ned plenty of times in the past — they were best friends, after all — and Ned likewise had done the same for him...to varying degrees of success.

Peter already knew what the article was about — his phone had read it to him on the way to school that morning. And that wasn't mentioning the intense news coverage Sokovia was getting, thanks to this article.

"It's crazy, right?" Ned asked, almost laughing in bewilderment. "First aliens attack New York, we get our own team of superheroes, and now Sokovia's uprising against their Communist overlords — getting their asses kicked by Mutants!"

Peter didn't have much recourse but to agree. For the past six months, everything has felt very strange to him — and not because of his newfound spidey-powers (a fact which no one knew about, except Tony Stark). It was like the whole world had been turned on its head. What was normal was strange, and the strange was the new normal. Mutants and uprisings, what next? A secret Soviet plot to take over the world? "I know, it feels like it's from a movie or something."

"You hear what they're saying, that the girl in the picture is only fifteen years old?" Ned just shook his head, disbelieving. "Not that you can really tell, since her face is hidden, but still. So here this chick is, fighting for freedom in some crappy country. What have I done today? Procrastinated on Mr. Harrington's homework."

"It'd be cool to meet her," Peter agreed, glancing down at the magazine again. "You think it's true, that she's really an American? That some kid from here somehow managed to get all the way over there?"

"Oh, sure," Ned said, earning a surprised look from Peter. Ned just shrugged. "I mean, if you've been kidnapped by the KGB."

"Ned, the KGB was disbanded in 1991."

"So they say," Ned shot back in a conspiratorial whisper, making Peter just snort in response. "What, you don't think there isn't something weird going on over there? I mean, hello, they have a freaking Chairman in charge over there, that no one ever knew about, until that girl, Rebel or whatever, mentioned him. Who even is this guy? How the hell has he stayed in charge for so long? Why is he kidnapping people? Was he part of the Soviet Union?"

The questions fell rapid-fire out of Ned's mouth, nearly overwhelming Peter. Thankfully, they finally got to the lunch line, and Peter had to hold up his hand, before the other kids started giving them weird looks. "Whoa, slow down, Agent Mulder, you're giving me a headache. I'm pretty sure that's what everyone is trying to find out right now. Isn't Anderson Cooper already in Sokovia, reporting on the situation?"

"Oh, yeah, I heard he was on the first flight out just two hours after the story broke. Now everyone's going crazy. I mean, just look at those guys," Ned gestured to the TVs hanging from the walls on either end of the cafeteria. Each were of different channels, talking about different things. News stations from all over the world were desperate to get cameras in Sokovia. "They can't decide what's more important; the presidential election or the People's Uprising."

"Doesn't help that it's Voting Day, either," Peter added. They shuffled forward in line. Across the way, a kid got up on one of the tables to change the channel on the second TV, switching to the revolution talk. Not many kids were interested in an election they couldn't vote in. TIME magazine
had great timing (pun intended).

As they continued to wait, Peter flipped back through the article, looking for something. He wasn't sure what at first, but something about it had struck him as unusual. A sense of *déjà vu*. He went to look for it again, scanning each line carefully.

"What's up, dude?" Ned asked five minutes later, after they'd gotten their food and already sat down. He must have noticed the intense expression on Peter's face; he was still scanning the article (it was longer than he first thought).

"I don't know, just something Frink wrote," Peter hadn't found it yet, and was half-mumbling around his finger as he chewed on it. "She was talking about Rebel and — oh, here it is." He pointed to the passage so Ned could read it for himself.

"I can't help but note the slight stutter in her voice, although she doesn't seem nervous or afraid. Perhaps just a speech impediment. The charming spray freckles on Rebel's face only further hammer in how young she is." Ned narrated out loud, in a hammy English accent. He glanced up at Peter, one eyebrow raised. "Okay, so?"

"It just, I don't know," Peter bit back his thought, resting his cheek on his fist, elbow on the table. He did the page a one over, looking over at the photo taking up the other half of the spread. The article, and all its photography, took up almost twenty pages in the entire magazine. "Just that description. It...it reminds me of Mia."

Ned blinked at him, before comprehension dawned across his head; then he glanced away. "Sorry, dude. I know you're still messed up about her."

Peter thought it was fair to say Ned didn't know Mia as well as he did. Granted, Peter didn't know as much as he thought he did, either. But still, Peter was sure he knew the essence of her character, of who she was — enough that he could find the traces of where she'd been.

And for some reason he was finding it in a TIME magazine.

"I know she's still alive," Peter said, perhaps a little too quickly. Ned raised his eyebrows at him, and Peter sighed, hunching up his shoulders. "Sorry, I just — I don't know. Three days after I get an email from her in Sokovia, and the whole country explodes into chaos. It can't be a coincidence. And it's been over a week now, and I haven't heard anything else from her. What if something happened? A lot of people died in the Uprising, Ned. What if she's one of them?"

Something about it struck him as incredibly odd, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Peter's gut was telling him that Mia was related to this somehow, but how could that be? Mia was hardly in the physical state to get involved in these sorts of things.

"Man," Ned threw his head back, holding out his hands. "If Mia somehow survived two years in god-knows-where, and then managed to hack a Soviet satellite just to send you a little message, you really think that one little revolution and she's gonna bite the dust?"

The optimism was a bit surprising coming from Ned — then again, Ned believed there were three culprits to the Kennedy assassination, one of them a Mutant. Still, it was a bit reassuring. At least someone believed him, at least someone listened.

But Peter still held reservations. "Seriously? You went to her funeral, man."

"If I recall correctly, so were you, my dude."
Peter frowned, annoyed; Ned had a point. But he wasn't about to concede that. "You don't get it, man. You weren't there when she...when she collapsed. Someone like her, in her condition...she wouldn't survive a day in Jersey. How can she stand a chance in freakin' Sokovia?"

Ned opened his mouth to speak, but Peter just shook his head, closing the magazine, and thereby the argument. With that distinctive cover, Rebel in her yellow rain coat, red-and-white striped scarf waving like a flag, Peter couldn't help but wonder: "I just wish I had a way to know she's all right."

(here's the cover, made by me :) I love making art for this fic, in case you couldn't tell :P)
Chapter Summary

Freedom at last! Amelia, Wanda, and Pietro have finally escaped Sokovia, Now heading on their way to America. But it’s a long way to go, and they aren’t safe yet.

As Amelia remembers more of her past in the Crucible, they conduct more daring attacks on the teens.

Can they get home before they’re captured first? Will she remember the crucial details in time?

How far must Amelia go before she’s free of the Crucible entirely?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"I can't believe it," I said, flipping back through the pages again. I read the article once, twice, three times, before it finally registered just how much shit I was in. It had taken almost an hour to complete, but hell I did it. "Oh, my god, everyone knows who I am. They know what I look like!"

At once, I dropped the magazine, hand grabbing my yellow coat. Thank god I had taken it off
earlier. But Pietro just laughed, and when I scowled at him, he gestured towards the square. "Look, Amelia. Look at what everyone's wearing."

It took me a second to understand what I saw. The bright splashes of yellow, all across town. People wearing yellow coats, just like mine, in broad daylight. On their phones, buying food, chatting in stores and cafes. Walking further into town, I thought I saw another image of myself flashing on a tv screen through a window. Everyone was seeing this. Everyone was talking about me.

About Sokovia.

"It's like…" I tried to put my finger on it. "A sign of solidarity? A protest? This is so weird."

"Well, I like it," Wanda chirped, smiling at me. "It means you will be harder to find. The Crucible cannot catch us now!"

We laughed, not because it was funny, but because it was true, it was amazing, it was incredible. It felt like an invisible weight had finally lifted off my shoulders. My feet were too light on the ground. That sense of being free, of finally being able to breathe without feeling like you're being choked. Like someone is watching your every move, behind your back.

It was the best feeling in the world. No one knew where I was. No one knew how to find me. For now, that was the best thing I could ask for.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of Pietro's stomach growling. We all looked at him, and Pietro placed a hand on his abdomen, smiling sheepishly. "Hunger waits for no man. And maybe something other than water and dried nuts."

"We could steal," Wanda said, casting a wary glance at me, apparently already sensing my protest.

"Just," I held up a finger. "Before we do that, I think we should try something else first."

"What? Buying with our non-existent money?" Pietro frowned.

"No," I said, shaking my head, then pointing into an alley behind a bakery. "Checking the trash. Me and my cousin did it all the time. It's completely legal — in America, anyways."

Wanda and Pietro exchanged doubtful looks, but I just waved my hand, beckoning them to follow me, as I headed into the alley. "Come on, I'll show you."

In the shadow of the bakery stood a big green dumpster. It didn't smell particularly nice, but it was only noon, and I knew there had to be something in there. The twins trailing behind me, I flipped open the dumpster lid and peered inside. "Bingo!"

Reaching inside, I withdrew an entire box of powdered donuts. The twins gaped at me, and Pietro snatched it out of my hands, flipping the box open and taking a large chomp out of the first donut. With white sugar all over his mouth, he swallowed and exclaimed, "It's still fresh! Why would they throw away good food?"

"It's 'old'," I said, sitting on the lip of the Dumpster and making bunny-ears with my fingers. "Probably made yesterday, didn't get sold. Bakeries and restaurants throw out day-old food, usually because they like keeping their products super fresh. Also — they're French. That's just how they are. It happens everywhere in New York. The best ones are behind the pizza places, they just throw out whole pies that someone didn't come to pick up."

Wanda trotted up to the Dumpster. Standing on her tip-toes, she peered in, and with a little bit of
magic, withdrew with a box of croissants. Stepping back, she took a bite of the fluffy pastry, closing her eyes in contentment. Then she paused, opened her eyes, and fixed me with an odd look.

"What?" I asked, as I grabbed some Danish pastries. Lemon, my favorite.

"Why did you eat from Dumpsters at home?" Wanda asked. "I thought everyone in America was rich."

I snorted so hard I nearly fell into the Dumpster. Catching myself, I lowered to the ground, saying, "What? No, no, Peter and I, we weren't rich. A lot of people aren't. Most are just well-off, you know, just normal."

"So, you were...poor?" Pietro asked, looking concerned, as if he didn't want to believe me.

"I don't know, I guess," I made a face. I didn't like the word 'poor'. It made us sound needy. "It was just easier to find some food in the Dumpster, so we didn't have to pay for more later. We didn't do it all the time. Peter's got a bigger appetite than me. And we didn't just get food from Dumpsters. Usually we looked for old stuff people threw out, stuff that was still good but they didn't want anymore. It's technically fair game."

"So, you're saying this is what we should do for now on," Pietro guessed wisely.

"Consider it an addendum to the 'don't steal until you have to' rule."

Pietro considered it for a moment, then shrugged. "Sounds good to me."

We ate in silence for a moment, just relishing the taste of sweet, sweet breakfast pastries in our mouth. I was hungry, so hungry that I ate two of Pietro's donuts and one of Wanda's croissants, along with the Danishes I picked up. I couldn't remember the last time I ate so much sugar. In fact, I think that was the first time I had a croissant.

Still hungry, I looked back down into the Dumpster, pushing away half-empty boxes, food that had already been picked through by customers. For the sake of sanitation and my own gag reflex, I didn't want something that had already been in someone's mouth.

Instead, I found something else.

"Nice," I said as I pulled out what looked to be a Polaroid camera, its black plastic hiding well in the shadowy pockets between the trash.

"Is that a camera?" Pietro wandered over, peering at it in my hands. Its strap was broken and the viewfinder cracked, but it still appeared to be fully functioning — there was still film inside. There was a small circular sticker in one corner by the lens, with the Star and Stripes printed on it. Maybe a tourist dumped the camera when it appeared busted.

I tested the button, and the bulb went off. Pietro recoiled when the flash caught him right in the eye. "Ah! Warning next time?"

"Sorry, surprise selfie," I laughed, pulling out the photo as the camera printed it. "I told you there's good stuff hiding in these things. You just have to look."

I shook the paper until the little black square changed color, and Pietro's face appeared on it, the wide-eyed surprise the flash caused. I held it up, appraising. "Hmm, not bad."

"Let me see," Pietro jumped up to snatch the photo from my fingers, while Wanda took the camera.
Holding the camera up, lens to her face, she asked, "What is a self-ie?"

"It's this," I said, reaching over and pressing the button. Wanda gasped as the camera flashing again. "A self-portrait."

Another photo printed — her image was mouth open, shocked, in what I considered to be a priceless expression. I handed it back to her, laughing. "Ha! That's perfect!"

"Ugh!" Wanda said, pushing the camera back at me, but looking more amused than offended. She and Pietro then compared photos, before looking at me. "Now you take one."

"Pfft," I said, knowing she wanted me to look just as silly and ridiculous as they did. Holding up the camera to my face, I used my free hand to make a peace sign, and took a picture. As the photo came out, I said, "I'm calling this my 'Glad to Be Alive' selfie. Maybe I'll show Peter when I get back."

That was actually a really good idea now that I thought about it. Bring a camera back from my travels around Europe? Collect the craziest photographic documentary, of my life after escaping the KGB and starting a nationwide revolution? Images and pictures that could implicate me in a world-changing event that we had yet to understand the full implications of?

Peter would love it.

"You almost look as good as me," Pietro said when he looked at my photo, and flashed me a cheeky grin when I made a sound of complaint. "What? It's a compliment!"

I stuck my tongue out at him. "At least that black eye is on your good side."

"Ah, you noticed!" Pietro said, a hand rising to test the skin under his right eye. It had remained after the fight on the train, once a violent purple, now yellow and green around the edges. "I heard women love a man with scars."

I just rolled my eyes, the best I could do when I found myself unable to find a comeback. What could I say, I didn't expect my insult to backfire; Pietro's quick, cheesy charm got me blushing, and I was glad that Wanda finally spoke and interrupted that line of thought.

"Victory," Wanda snorted as she examined my picture, the hand gesture I had made. She threw me a quizzical look. "Victory against who, the Chairman? You want to fight back?"

"I — no," I said, a little taken aback. Fighting the Chairman, really? It didn't occur to me that Wanda would misinterpret the sign. "I'd rather just go home. It's supposed — it means peace, the V sign. Well, now it does. Running away from the Chairman is all the victory I need."

Wanda frowned before handing me back the photo. "I guess it helps when you don't remember."

Unfortunately, I'd have to save my thinking for later, because our meal was interrupted when the back door of the bakery opened. Out came one of the cooks with a bin of trash. He spotted us, roosting at his Dumpster, and dropped his trash immediately, shouting at us in blustery French. We
booked it out of there before he could catch us.

There was no real fear to it, and I caught Wanda's laughter as we danced and darted away from the cook, who was older and fatter than us. People turned and stared as we broke out into the street.

Eventually we found ourselves down by the seaside. The buildings were shorter here, and the smell of saltwater prominent. It wasn't until we saw the harbors, the piers, though, did Wanda say something.

"Boats," she said, at the vast array of ships and vessels coming in. Sailboats, fishing boats, cruise liners, cargo ships. She pointed to one in particular, waving three different flags, one of which was American. "You think we can get you home on one of those?"

"On a cruise ship?" I said, a little skeptically. We stood at the top of the hill overlooking the harbor, salty wind blowing up from the sea. It was fresh and invigorating, and reminding me vaguely of Manhattan, of the ferry trips to Staten Island. "That's pretty lux. I'm not exactly sure we'll fit in, looking like...well, like we do."

"You mean battle-hardened revolutionaries?" Pietro cocked an eyebrow. "It's all right, you can say it."

"Yeah, yeah, sure," I said, shaking my head, even though that wasn't what I was going to say at all. The words 'homeless', 'crazy', and possibly even 'criminals', were the first to pop into mind. "Look, the point is, unless Wanda's going to Jedi Mind Trick every guard and employee on board, it's not going to be easy."

"I don't know what a Jedi is," Wanda said. "But I was going to suggest just 'mind-tricking'," She made air-quotes here, and I had a feeling she was mocking me. "The ticket salesman. They will not question us if we already appear legitimate, no?"

That was actually a pretty solid idea, and I was a little embarrassed that I hadn't thought of it sooner. "Oh, right. Yeah, that works, too."

Pietro elbowed me in the side. "Hey, sister, you finally got Amelia to admit she is wrong. Perhaps not the brains after all?"

"Still more brains than you," I muttered, but with a smirk. So that was a little annoying, but I knew Pietro meant well. "Well, tickets it is, then. Now where the hell do we get them?"

It took some looking around; there were a lot of little shops down by the beach, which is where we found a swarming crowd of tourists, from a variety of nations. But none of the shops sold tickets, and eventually I just ended up asking the owner of a bodega, in my hesitant French, where we could book a spot on one of the cruises.

He gave me a slightly suspicious once-over (Not that I blamed him, I still had scratches and bruises all over me), before giving me directions to a ticket master located on the docks. Wanda and Pietro, who were waiting outside in the fountain square, were pleased with this news.

"So, it is a real person," Wanda said. "Good. It shouldn't take long for us to get tickets then. I wonder
"It must be weeks," Pietro replied, scratching the back of his head, then gestured to the sea. "It is the entire ocean. Do you think we might end up trapped on there? If something bad happened, there would be no place to go."

"Cruise ships are big, I'm there'll be plenty of space to hide if we have to," I said to reassure them, even as a new dread appeared in my gut. I knew what they were afraid of: a rehash of the train attack, of being trapped in a dangerous location. On a boat, it'd be worse. There would be other people that could get hurt instead. And if the ship took too much damage…

Pietro and Wanda seemed relatively convinced — at the very least, the idea of a luxury cruise as our way home was certainly not the worst thing that could happen to us. But once they started walking away, I realized, and called after them.

"Guys, w-wait, just wait a second. I, um, I wanted to talk to you about something," I said, taking a deep breath. I rubbed my hands together, even though they weren't cold. "About what happened on the train."

Wanda and Pietro exchanged silent looks, and I knew they were concerned. None of us had said a single thing about what happened since it...well, happened. Up until this point, I had been resolute in never talking about that again, but now that I've thought back on it, I realized I still needed questions answered. Important questions that might come up again, if indeed the worst of the worst happened on the cruise. I couldn't let it happen again.

They looked back at me, waiting. I hesitated, before I said, "It's about what the Komitet said to me. That, um, that trigger phrase."

"Amelia, you shouldn't worry about that," Wanda said, her expression softening a little. Standing in the middle of the square, the three of us stuck out, and I had to clamp down on the paranoia that we were being watched. "As long as you don't hear it, you'll be fine."

"But I did hear it. Parts of it, at least. And I just — I want to know what it means."

"You don't…" Pietro frowned, tilting his head slightly. "You don't remember them, do you?"


"Amelia, don't!" Wanda pleaded, suddenly grabbing me by the arms and shaking me. Her eyes bored into mine, her expression filled with panic. "Don't say it. If you have to say it, say it in English."

"What, why?" I demanded, trying to shake her off, but Wanda's grip was iron, and sent a strange tingling sensation up my arms and back. Wanda's reaction was unexpected, and it angered me. However, my anger was abated by the fact that she had a point, in a way — saying those words had rendered me inexplicably dizzy. The world swayed around my, and my tongue curled up and back, like those words had triggered my gag reflex. What the hell?

I shook my head, just so the world would be even again. "If I say it in English, it won't make any sense to you."

"It won't make any sense anyways," Wanda said. "It needs to be in English, so it doesn't work."

That didn't make any sense to me. Why would the words work in one language but not the other? It
was all technically the same, wasn't it? Or maybe the sound of the words was just as important as their meanings.

Well, Wanda seemed to know best, so I went with it.

"Fine." I said, now in English, and Wanda nodded in encouragement. At least I could easily translate the phrase in my head, and so I said: "Rebel. Columbia. Eager. Ninety. Cradle. There was more, but that's when you hit him. What does it mean? It's not a sentence. They called it a trigger, so what, is it some kind of code?"

"Yes," Pietro said. "At least, we think so."

"You don't know what it does? What it's supposed to...trigger me into?"

"No." Wanda only shook her head, finally releasing me. She stepped back, her head bowed. "We were never there when they used it on you. In the Crucible. But I could feel it. I knew those words hurt you. You hated it. Each time, you were scared. I could hear it in your head. The pain. Not physical pain. They never touched you. But it was there, and it was..." Wanda just squeezed her eyes shut, pressing a hand to her temple. "I could not bear it. I could not stay with you, no matter how hard I tried. It was too much. Even now, I am surprised you are still as whole as you are."

"So, they used it to...hurt me?"

"I don't think so," Wanda frowned, and I sensed doubt in her words. "It did something to you, something else. It made you...unreachable. We could be in the same room, and your mind would be blocked from mine."

"You were different, too," Pietro added in a low voice. Sad, almost. He looked down at his hands as he said, "You didn't recognize us. You didn't hesitate when they told you to attack us. You didn't even recognize your own name, when we called to you. There was this strange look in your eye, like you saw everything but...but didn't react to it. Like you were dead."

"You were someone else," Wanda said, raising a hand to touch my arm; I wondered how much she knew I was feeling right now, how the ground seemed to tilt under my feet at hearing those words, how nauseous I felt. "But I knew the real Amelia was still there, somewhere deep inside. When I took away your memories, after we escaped, I thought maybe I removed the trigger as well...but apparently that it not true. The Crucible buried it deep in your mind, deeper than I dare to reach. It's a part of you now. But it wasn't all of you."

"How did you know it was me, then?" I asked, trying to level my breathing. All of this was frightening, and I almost started hyperventilating. I had no idea the Crucible had made it so easy for them to control me. What if something like that happened again? What if I really did forget who I was? "Back in the market, in Novi Grad. I didn't recognize you then, either. How did you know it wasn't, that it wasn't the other me? That I might hurt you?"

"Your eyes," Wanda said with a small smile and a shrug. "They weren't...dead anymore. You looked around too much. And your mind was open again. I could feel your fear, your confusion, the curiosity. It was someone good. Not the heartless soldier that the Crucible made."

Heartless. I had been heartless.

"It wasn't you." Pietro said, taking my hand. The contact made me jolt a little. I looked up into his eyes, and there was a sincerity there, trust that I could believe in his every word. "I know you wouldn't hurt us, if given the choice. The Crucible took that away from you. But you always got it
back. You were stronger than them. And your proved it, over and over again."

"It wasn't permanent?" I asked, voice barely a whisper as my eyebrows raised in hope.

Pietro shook his head. "The longest you were under was maybe...a few weeks at the most. That was at the beginning. They struggled finding ways of making it stick."

"I think something triggered you," Wanda added. "The same way you went under, you came back out. Something you saw, something you heard brought you back. We don't know what. We only ever saw the aftermath."

"But I still hurt you." I said. It wasn't a question, just a statement. A fact.

Wanda's eyes flicked away, distracted by memories, and I knew it must have been worse than she was letting on, even when she said, "Sometimes. It wasn't bad, though. They didn't want you to kill us. We were weapons of a different sort, too rare to lose. They just wanted to test you. To make sure that you could fight — and defeat — anything that got in your way. It was...it was our job to hurt you as much as possible. Kill you, if we could."

"What?" I stared. Wanda winced at how accusatory I sounded.

"We didn't want to!" Pietro quickly jumped in to her defense. "We did our best just to take you down. You were our friend, and we couldn't lose you. By that point we knew that you were the only way for us to get out alive. So, we hurt you...just enough to be convincing. It was just easier to let you defeat us. So, we could all live."

"Why would they want me dead?"

"They didn't." Wanda said, finally able to look back at me. There was pain in her eyes. I couldn't tell if it was from the memories of being attacked and betrayed by a friend, or the guilt of having to hurt me in return. "But the Crucible, they have no patience for failure. If you could not stand up to us, then you were of no use. Weakness is culled. Anyone who has it, dies."

"We made sure you didn't." Pietro said.

A different person. I had been a different person. It took me a moment to process this. Longer to understand its implications. I probably never would. The Crucible had inserted a trigger in my head that could never be removed. I would have it as long as I lived. As long as I was alive, I was always in danger of being turned against myself. Of becoming the Crucible's soldier again.

The bright blue sky and the smell of salt water no longer held its charm for me anymore, not with this information heaped upon my shoulders. How could I appreciate all of this when there was something terrible inside of me, just waiting to be let loose?

"I suppose I should be thanking you, then," I eventually said, looking at Wanda and Pietro with a smile. It was genuine, even if my mind was racing, my thoughts panicked and afraid. "I wouldn't be here if it weren't for you two."

"The same could be said for us," Wanda said, returning the smile, and Pietro squeezed my hand in reassurance. I didn't realize he hadn't let go. "None of us would be here without the other. The Crucible made a fatal mistake when they decided to put us all together under the same roof."

It was the best thing she could've said to me in that moment. It, of course, had to be ruined when someone tapped my shoulder and interrupted, "I'm sorry, did you three want a picture taken? I can help."
"What?" I said, turning around in surprise. Standing there, a few feet away, was a couple, middle-age, and definitely American in their flip flops and fanny packs. My own English caught me off guard, an automatic response to theirs. It took me a moment to register what they said, before looking down, seeing the camera I was still carrying in my hand. "Oh, I didn't —"

"Oh, my dear!" The woman jumped in surprise a little, her eyebrows shooting up when I turned to look at her. "What happened to your faces? You look like you were attacked by some bear!"

"Mugger, actually," the lie fell off my tongue faster than I could think about it. I gestured to Wanda and Pietro, who just stared back, dumbfounded. "We, uh, we got held up a few days ago. We're lucky they just took our wallets and not, you know, anything else."

"Oh, well that's such a shame!" The woman clucked her tongue, shaking her head.

"Is there anything we can do to help?" The man asked with an offered hand. "We could give you some spare change."

"No, no, that's fine," I said with a nervous laugh. What could I say, friendly help from complete strangers was a little unexpected, especially here. Was it because I was American? "We'll be okay, we just got a little beat up. Happens sometimes when you travel, right?"

"Well, it's an awful way to spend your vacation," the woman said with sympathetic disapproval. "I'm sure your parents must have been worried sick after that happened!"

"Ah," I saw Pietro open his mouth to reply, and threw him a quick negatory look to stop him from speaking and giving us away. I looked back at the tourist couple with a simple shrug. "Yeah, they were pretty upset. We're sort of grounded, now, although I guess it's our fault for wandering around at night."

It seemed like a good detail to add. Unnecessary, maybe, but realistic, if the three of us were actually here on vacation with our non-existent parents. Seriously, though, Mom would never let me outside again if she knew I had ever been mugged. I couldn't imagine how she'd react if/when I told her about what actually happened. I'd probably be locked up in an underground bunker for the rest of my life.

"Good thing you're not here alone," the man said with a nod. "A little adult supervision builds character."

I had to keep myself from snorting rudely. Thankfully, the woman spoke again before I had to think of a response: "If you like, we could still take that picture. Have one good memory of yourselves here, to tell your own children about later!"

"Smile!" The woman called with a grin. The camera flashed, and they returned to us with the camera and newly minted photo. "Oh, would you look at that. Three peas in a pod! I'm sure your mother and
father would love it."

"Oh, thanks, but we're not —" I stopped myself before I could correct her; I didn't anticipate her thinking all three of us were siblings, but I suppose it wasn't the worst assumption. Both Pietro and Wanda looked older enough than me to be convincing siblings, at least at a glance. "Ah, never mind. I hope your right. Maybe they won't be as angry with us."

"Oh, don't worry," the woman said with a laugh. "You know how parents get, they're just worried about you."

"I'm sure in a few years they'll be laughing all about this," The man added with a smile. "Well, probably. Better make it ten years, just to be sure. And, this may be my midlife crisis talking, but you look really familiar. Have we met before?"

He was looking at me when he asked this question, and I already knew where he'd seen me, even if he himself didn't remember. The TIME magazine only just came out; the sharp imagery would still be fresh in his mind.

But there was no way I was giving up the goose now. "Ah, no, sorry. We've never met before."

"Oh, okay. Like I said, mid-life crisis, gives you funny ideas. I guess you just have one of those faces…"

Thankfully, that blew over without any repercussions. I thanked them again for the photo, and the three of us waved them off as the couple went off on their merry way.

"That was weird," Wanda said as soon as the tourists were out of earshot.

"Really? I thought it was kind of sweet," I said, finally taking a moment to appreciate the photo. It was a good shot, none of us blinked, and despite our ragged clothes and banged-up appearance, we looked like we fit together. Pietro even turned his "good side" with the bruised eye towards the camera. Unbelievable.

"Of course you do, you trust the benevolence of random strangers," Pietro snorted, peering over my shoulder to admire the photo. "You two look terrible next to me."

I elbowed him in the gut, and Pietro retreated with a winded laugh. "Maybe because not everyone is out to get us."

"Or maybe because they're American, like you?" Wanda asked with a raised eyebrow, smirking.

"Okay, sure, that too. Is that so wrong?"

"It is fine!" Pietro said, pushing me gently with his shoulder in a joking manner. "We only make fun. You Americans are too friendly for your own good."

"How would you know? I'm the only American you've ever met."

"We know three now, actually," Wanda said, holding up her fingers, then jerked her head at the distant tourist couple when I looked confused. "You, and them. That tells us all we need to know, doesn't it?"

"So, you're saying I should be less friendly."

"Maybe don't smile as much."
"She doesn't smile a lot to begin with," Pietro pointed out.

"Still too much."

"I think I'll smile as much as I want," I said with a huff, only half-serious as I tucked away the photo in my pocket, alongside the rolled-up TIME magazine with my back on it. Wanda and Pietro were still giving me impish looks, victorious that they managed to get under my skin. "Come on, you jokers, let's go get those tickets before they're sold out."

✮✮✮

Retrieval of the tickets had been easy. The ticket master was exactly where the bodega owner said it was, and it took exactly two minutes and seven seconds for Wanda to acquire three tickets on the next liner out of what I now understood to be the city of Nice. We had three days until the ship departed for Miami, Florida.

After that, it'd be smooth sailing getting back home (pun intended).

To wait out that time, we decided to find a hotel to stay at. We acquired rooms the same way we acquired tickets — a twist of Wanda's fingers, a flash of red magic, and the desk clerk just handed us the keys and told us to have a nice stay.

Wanda called dibs on the shower, while Pietro decided to pop back outside, to gather more supplies. I knew that meant stealing, more likely than not, but didn't argue. We had lost our bags on the train, and we nothing besides the literal clothes on our backs to keep us going. I didn't imagine us starving on the ship back to America, but having a stash of supplies, both food and otherwise, would make me feel a lot better.

That left me, alone in the main room, thinking about anything and everything.

The Mediterranean Sea sparkled like a million sapphires under the sun, and we got a perfect view of it from the hotel room Wanda snagged. The room itself was quaint, warm rustic, as opposed to the bland luxury found in most American hotels. The floor was hardwood and the bathroom had homemade soaps. The bed had a wrought iron bed board, and the bed springs creaked a little when you sat down — but the pillows were soft and smelled of lavender. The quilt was finely stitched, and salty air breathed through the crack in the window.

Lying down on the bed, staring up at the plaster ceiling, I felt a moment of peace. It was hard to believe that some people already had this life, that they had nothing to worry about, nothing to fear. I wanted to live here forever.

But I knew I couldn't.

I had to get back to America, back to New York, as soon as possible. Staying here wasn't an option. Maybe we could take a few days to rest, to get the train ride out of our system, but after that, we'd have to hit the road again.

I thought back to my first plan of returning to America, the one I made in the theater in Novi Grad. Back then, I had given myself — all three of us — a month to prepare. A month! God, I was an idiot. No, we didn't have a month to do this. There was no way I could've been prepared for
anything the world threw at me. We were jumping from point to point by the skin of our teeth.

I picked myself up, went to the window overlooking the bay. There were ships coming in, boats going out. I squinted, thinking. What would be our next step out of here…?

Wanda had just finished showering when Pietro returned. He'd brought more food with him (swore he didn't steal it), along with fresh clothes (which he did steal). Another pair of shoes for him, as his current pair were run down with holes and covered in ash; as well as a vest, to conserve body heat. A new shirt for me that wasn't covered in blood — I already knew the cold didn't bother me as much as the others. And gloves and leggings for Wanda, by far the least covered of the three of us.

We spent the next day and a half, recuperating, catching up with the news. TV in France wasn't censored, and we got every major worldwide news channel here. As I predicted earlier, news of Sokovia had reached nearly every corner of the world. A woman named Darcy Lewis, from New Mexico, had started an online movement on Twitter and Facebook, called #YellowCoatsUnited — explaining the phenomenon we saw earlier, of people wearing similar jackets to mine. People, mostly teens and young adults, posted their selfies of them wearing yellow coats online, which then of course made it to national television. Apparently, it was a movement to spread awareness of Sokovia's troubled state and their support for the people seeking freedom.

Wanda and Pietro were ecstatic. They got the attention they wanted, although they had no idea what Twitter or Facebook were, even after I tried explaining it to them, twice. I wasn't sure if I should tell them that online activism didn't usually have long lifespans — but #YellowCoatsUnited (kind of a stupid name in my opinion, but I never liked online activism anyways, and beggars can't be choosers) was growing exponentially, at a rate that no one predicted. Even the President of the United States got in on the action; one of the most famous photos from the movement was the First Family standing outside the White House, in coordinated yellow jackets.

So... who knows at this point. Maybe this time something good might come of it.

It was enough to spur me outside again, to check out Nice and wonder at how fast the world was changing. The Chairman had poked the hornet's nest when he sent his Komitet after us. Their involvement had directly led to the uprising in Novi Grad, and now the Chairman had lost control of his entire country.

I bet he never had that in mind when he first decided to kidnap me. It was a satisfying thought.

I headed down to the harbor, deciding to check out the ships as they came in, and get a better idea of what the twins and I would be stuck on for the next couple of weeks. I didn't like the idea of it taking nearly a month on wide open water, in a very vulnerable location, to get us home, but I couldn't let doubt overwhelm me now. This was the closest I'd gotten to home since I first woke up in the forest of Sokovia. A part of me still couldn't believe I'd made it this far.

On my way down to the pier, I passed the U.S. Embassy. I was tempted to go inside, to tell them who I was, but I held back, due to fear. If I told them who I was, I was putting myself on the map for some very dangerous people. I already knew someone was watching Peter, bugging his phone. Who knows what else. That's why I held off from further communicating with him. I didn't know how far the Chairman's reach went, but if he was as insidious as I thought, with half of his Komitet agents being American themselves, then he had to have spies in the U.S. government as well. He'd be monitoring for me. If I made myself known, then I'd be bringing the entire force of the Crucible down on our heads.

I couldn't risk that. No. I was only going to contact the authorities when I was safely on American soil, far away from Sokovia and the Crucible. It would be only too easy for him to take me back
now, while I was still so close.

To take my mind off my worry, I decided to take some pictures. I didn't really have a lot of talent, and the focusing toggle was a little iffy, but I was sure I got a few good shots somewhere in that mess. I had no idea what it made to take a good picture, what made the artistic stand out from the casual shot.

I just took images of Nice, of the architecture, the scenery, pieces of an idyllic place I could take home with me, and prove to others where I'd been. Remind myself that this was all real. That I was still in control.

Out on the pier, blustery wind picked up my jacket. I left the yellow raincoat at the hotel, for obvious reasons, so wore only the green utility jacket over my shirt. The day was warm enough that I didn't have to wear too many layers...or maybe I was just immune to cold temperatures now. Either way.

I wasn't in the commercial, civilian part of the harbor, which may mean I wasn't supposed to be here, but then again, there wasn't anyone else around to tell me so. The ground beneath me was cement, probably to support all the cargo coming in, and I stood over a large drop off, the waves lapping three hundred feet below. I hunkered down behind some crates, out of the way from prying eyes, and aimed my camera at the Sea.

I was nearly tempted to go swimming, just for the heck of it. I didn't, because 1) probably illegal and/or dangerous, at least with all these ships around and 2) I wasn't a strong swimmer. I'd learned, certainly when I was twelve, at the community pool in Hell's Kitchen. But for the same reason I didn't partake in gym class, I didn't swim much, either. I was just never strong enough to stay in the water for very long. Even worse, I sank like a rock, as little as I had weighed then.

Maybe it would be different now, I had a stronger endurance, but that wouldn't make up for the fact that my swimming experience was almost next to none. I heard of Olympic athletes drowning simply because they swam in deeper or rougher waters than they were used to. I was not about to follow their example.

That's when I saw something out of the corner of my eye. Looking over, I spotted movement down on one of the cargo ships in the harbor below. A man was deboarding — tall, dark shades, golden blond hair slicked back, and dressed in an immaculate white suit. In one hand he carried a briefcase, striking in its acid green color. What was that, alligator skin? The guy looked too rich, too important to be coming off a dirty-ass boat full of storage containers. The man would fit better coming off a private yacht.

I frowned, held up the camera to look at him with the zoom mechanic. The man's face appeared in stark clarity. Neat stubble on a strong jawline, a shark-toothed smile as he greeted another man coming up the gangplank.

I paused when I realized I recognized the blond man in the white suit. Not because I knew him, but because I'd seen his face plenty of times on TV.

Holy crap. That was Dr. Aldrich Killian. The creator and head of AIM, and one of the most secretive men in the world.

I only knew of him because as far as the rest of the world was concerned, Dr. Killian almost didn't exist. He was a fascinating subject from a media standpoint; most people in Dr. Killian's position of power could rarely afford the amount of privacy he lived in. A billionaire philanthropist, Dr. Killian seemed to have appeared out of nowhere about five years ago. His company started as an ordinary power supply company, before quickly exploding into an all-out R&D manufacturer that invented
new, advanced clean energy solutions and aided developing 3rd world countries all around the
globe. How he managed all of this is known to only a few people, and none of them are talking to
the media.

According to the official story, Killian started out as a mere grad student with big dreams just ten
years ago, a man with no money, no resources, but plenty of world-changing ideas...through a series
of wise investments, clever entrepreneurship, a genius mind, and a general charming personality,
Aldrich Killian managed to climb the ranks as one of the most influential people in the world.

How he managed to keep such a private life was yet another mystery. He probably had a house in
Los Angeles and/or New York, not that anyone knew how to find it. Each of his public appearances
were carefully orchestrated - Dr. Killian showed up to special events, always dressed to the nines,
before once more disappearing into the night. He was impossible to follow by the wily paparazzi —
no, there would be no candid shots of Aldrich Killian jogging in his booty shorts any time soon.

So the fact that I caught him here, in France, was one hell of a thing. I was probably the only person
outside of Dr. Killian's own entourage that knew he was here.

"History in the making," I said to myself, half-joking. God, Peter would die to be in my shoes right
now. He'd be taking a million pictures, waste all of his film, just for this one moment. How much
would the media pay for a candid of Aldrich Killian?

I began snapping a few pictures, capturing Killian's face as he paused to shake the hand of the other
man coming aboard. The man had olive skin and dark hair, and there was a noticeable sheen on his
forehead. Even from here I could tell the strange man was trembling. He wasn't sweating because it
was hot out, that's for sure. In fact, the day had gotten colder since we got here. No, the strange man
looked utterly nervous in front of Killian, who gave him a grin, and the man returned it with a half-
hearted smile. They were exchanging words, but from this distance I couldn't hear what they said.
Their faces were turned at the wrong angle, so even if I could read their lips, I wouldn't be able to.
The most I could figure was that Dr. Killian knew the strange man.

Then Killian clapped the strange man on the shoulder and they went on their separate ways. I made
sure to get a few shots of the strange man, too, as he started walking again, getting different angles of
his face as he glanced over his shoulder, as if he knew he was being watched.

Hmm, now that I thought about it, the strange man did look a little familiar, too. But I couldn't recall
where I last saw him. He wasn't famous, at least not Aldrich Killian famous, otherwise I would've
known…

As the dark-haired man disappeared inside the ship, I felt something drip on my hand. Looking
down, I was started to find blood drops along the back of my thumb. Bringing up my hand, I
touched my face.

My nose was bleeding again.

Oh no.

I had just registered the dread when Killian's ship exploded.
I made this last August, when I had planned this chapter. Did my best to capture their likenesses :)

Chapter End Notes

Woo! Finally snuck in a title drop! Hope it makes sense, at least in the context of the story :)}
Chapter Twenty-Five

Chapter Notes

Sorry for the hiatus, school and life really has all of my time lately. I haven’t abandoned any of my stories, I promise.

In other news, I’ve added Ned Leeds to the first five chapters of this fic, so please check it out, because he’ll definitely be showing up later (thank you, Spider-Man: Homecoming).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Five

✮

I felt the flash of heat before the air blast hit me.

I just had the time to cover my face before the explosion bowled me over.

Tossed backwards like a rag doll, I went ass over teakettle before bouncing off some wooden pallets and crashing to the ground on my side. I rolled, coming to a stop on my stomach, winded.

It took me a second to remember how to breathe again. I blinked several times, trying to see though the blinding white afterimage of the explosion on my retina.

My ears were ringing, and I winced as I tried to pick myself up. I could still see that man in my head, right before he entered the ship. Who was he? What the hell happened?

"Amelia!" Came a call, and I looked up to see a silver flash — Pietro spotted me over his shoulder and skidded to a stop, the bottoms of his sneakers smoking. He spun around, grabbed my arm with one hand and helped me to my feet.

My knees were shaking, and I clung to Pietro's arms to steady myself. I felt like I'd just been punched in the chest by the Hulk. I was having trouble focusing my eyes. Everything felt like a blur.

"Are you okay?" Pietro took my face into his hands, turning my head this way and that. My vision finally cleared and the first thing I saw was his worried blue gaze, looking right into mine. "Your nose is bleeding again. What happened?"

"I'm fine, it's just..." I pulled away, wincing against the headache pulsing in my head. I pressed a hand to my temple, trying to think past it. "I saw something bad, I don't...I'm not sure what. This man entered the boat and a few minutes later it just..."
I gestured vaguely at the now burning wreckage. The ship was sinking, a hole blasted in its center, sending either end into the water. The prow jutted out sharply from the bay. Through the smoke and falling ash coating its sides, I could just barely read the white-painted words on the side of the ship:

*HMS Adelaide*

Just then, a loud groan pierced the air. I watched, awed and horrified, as the raised prow started to tilt. Slowly, its shadow loomed over the pier, before it came crashing down.

*WHOOOMMMFFF.*

Stone cracked and crumbled, but held as the onlookers still on the pier finally realized the incoming danger. They ran in a panic, from this distance looking like scattering ants at the sight of a massive boot coming to crush them. I couldn't tell if anyone was hurt in the impact, as the smoke thickened. The smell of sulfur and brimstone lay heavy in the air now. With the sea wind blowing inward, the debris would no doubt spread all over the city.

"You actually saw it happen?" Pietro asked, a hand on his head as he watched the destruction in helplessness.

When he looked at me, I could see the fear in his eyes. I already knew what he was thinking. *Did they find us already?*

"I'm not sure what I saw," I admitted. "Aldrich Killian just came off that ship."

"Who's Aldrich Killian?"

"He's — he's, ah…" I stuttered, paused, pressed a hand to my head. The air was thick, it was hard to breath. The pounding in my head was making me dizzy. I already knew what was going to happen before it did.

"Amelia?" Pietro turned to me, reaching out when I started to sway on my feet. He caught my arm, but I didn't feel it. His voice echoed, distant, like he was shouting from down a long hallway.

"...Whoa... easy, are...okay? Amelia!"

I blinked once, then ground rushed to meet my face. The world went dark.

✮✮✮

"Get up."

The floor was cold.

"I said," a female voice, even colder. *"Get up."

A steel-toed boot slammed into my ribcage. I gasped uselessly, diaphragm spasming, as my ribs cracked. Bruises on top of bruises. My knuckles were sticky with blood and broken skin.

I didn't want to move. But I didn't have a choice. *Want* didn't matter here, I already knew that, and I was stupid for resisting.

*Get up,* I told myself. *Get up or they'll kill you.*
As I stood, arms weighed down with exhaustion, my lungs burning, my knees shaking, a distant part of me realized this was a memory. That I was reliving this moment from the past — somewhere trapped inside the Crucible.

This knowledge didn't help much, and I was soon sucked back into the consciousness of the moment. The room was made of concrete, hard gray walls and a floor marked with paint. Or blood. It was hard to tell. The lighting was a dim, sickly yellow, fluorescent lights flickering overhead. The ceiling was unusually low. I felt like I had to hunch to fit in. Although that may also be the exhaustion.

As my eyes refocused on the red-headed woman in front of me, I was momentarily distracted by the cloud of breath in front of my face. It was always cold down here. Deep in the bowels of the Crucible, nothing had ever seen daylight. I couldn't remember the last time I'd seen the sun. I'd been so cold for so long, I stopped feeling it a while ago.

How long had I been here? Weeks, months, maybe longer. It all felt like a blur. No one told me the date. Even *that* would give me too much power, too much knowledge.

In front of me, Brandt readied herself again. We'd been going at this for hours now, but she was hardly slowing down. Her skin radiated in heat waves, visible around her silhouette. Her pupils had that faint orange glow. Brand wasn't allowed to use the full force of her powers on me during sparring matches, but she liked to singe a little, just to keep me on my toes.

She struck out, just as I raised my fists to defend myself. I blocked the blow with my forearm. Her knuckles burned my skin. I could hear the sizzle, but only winced, didn't cry out. She'd only hit harder if I made a sound.

Still, the blow and the pain knocked me back, and I stumbled to keep my footing. Despite the cool air, I was sweating, gasping for breath. Deciding not to let the pain slow me down, let Brandt think I was weakening, I retaliated — brought up my leg in a kick, forcing her back, before following it up with a fist.

Brandt had been expecting that. She dodged my kick, and grabbed my arm as I came for her. Before I knew it, her burning grip was around my wrist and she flipped me on my back. My head cracked against the cement floor.

I wanted to pass out, but my body didn't know when to stop. I was stronger now. I could take a beating and still keep going, even when I didn't want to anymore. But I couldn't make myself give out. Something deep within me refused to give up. It didn't matter that that's exactly what they wanted from me. I had to win, somehow.

Still, the takedown left me rattled, and I heard Brandt call out, "That's it? That's all you got, *Soldatka*?"

*Soldatka*. Soldier. I didn't have a name here. I wasn't sure if anyone here even knew I had one. That I used to have one.

And I had no idea who the other subjects they kept talking about were. According to Brandt, they lasted longer than I have, but I wasn't sure if that was true, or she was just trying to break me down further.

*No one leaves the Crucible alive.*

I remembered those words. One of the first things said to me when I woke up after the Baron
brought that staff upon my skull.

"Get up!" Brandt ordered again, delivering another kick to my side. I rolled over, wheezing. "What, are you just going to lie there and take it? Get up and fight!"

Blood in my mouth. Pain under my eye, in my chest, every muscle in my body. When did it end? When did it stop?

I didn't know. All I knew was to get back up, to keep getting back up...

The room shifted around me. The memory, changing. Now I was walking down a hallway. My footsteps echoed down the cold, slightly damp walls. There was someone behind me. I could hear their footsteps, too. Louder, heavier. Whoever it was, they were bigger than me.

The world swayed around me, a blur. My body functioned on its own, a machine, while my mind detached.

I could run. The hallway was empty before me. Closed doors on either side. Some distant exit ahead. I knew it was there. I'd seen it before. Images of it flashed in my mind. A door swinging open, a white, glowing rectangle, piercing the darkness. If only I could reach it…

No. As soon as the thought crossed my mind, it was crushed in an instant. A sudden, piercing headache that had tears pricking my eyes. No, I couldn't leave the Crucible. I didn't want to.

They made me. They turned me into what I was now. Finally, I had strength. I had worth. How could I leave? How could I betray them after all that they had done for me?

The Crucible was my home.

A cold hand clamped down on my shoulder. I looked down at the metal fingers gripping my skin. I turned my head to see who it was, my drifting consciousness unable to remember who it was. But before I could see their face, I was pushed into the room on the left.

*Whatever you do, don't show them your fear.*

The words echoed in my head, the one rebellious thought I had left. The one thing that kept me going. The Crucible wanted me to be afraid. They would never see it.

Then I was surrounded by faces.

Another memory? They were shifting so fast now. I felt dizzy, sick. The faces I recognized. Other soldiers. Brandt. Savin. Soldiers, but not like me. Different skillset. There was a word for them. It tickled at the edge of my mind.

*Extremis.*

"She's still standing," Savin called, smirking as he chewed his gum. He was always clean-shaven, his hair just as short. I was standing in the middle of a circle — some sort of fighting ring, but larger than the last one. It was brighter in here. I could see cages lining the wall behind their heads. "Johansson, it's your turn. See if she stays down this time."

A man stepped forward, dressed in black. He had tanned skin and dark hair, a beard. *It's him.* A voice whispered in my head. *The man on the ship. He's one of them.*

Somehow, knowing that didn't make me feel any better. Johansson, Brandt, Savin, everyone was all
wearing this armor, tactical, like some sort of special ops team. None of them bore weapons.

I felt myself ready into a defensive stance. I knew what was coming.

Johansson came at me. I only caught flashes of what happened next. Fists flying, trading blows, red eyes, glowing veins — I thought for sure I'd end up on my back, like I did with Brandt, but moments later I was still standing, and it was Johansson being helped up, groaning, rubbing his head.

A thick-accented voice behind me muttered, "She is learning, getting better…"

I should have felt victorious. But I felt nothing.

The world shifted again, the memory sliding forward beneath my feet. Walking out of that room, heading to...where? I couldn't remember. My thoughts were not in my head. I only knew I was supposed to go somewhere, that I had to be punctual, only for a hand to grab my arm and to be slammed against the wall.

I should have seen it coming. I'd seen the way he looked at me. I should've been more careful, on my guard.

But I wasn't. So of course Savin managed to catch me unawares.

"Hey there, sweetheart," I hated his voice. Savin grinned, looming over me. He always had something to say, but getting stuck like this with him was something new; Brandt didn't tolerate others playing around with me when she didn't specifically order them to.

My instincts hadn't been completely shut down, so I tried to throw him off of me. But Savin was bigger, and I was cornered in a small alcove, with nowhere to go and no one to rely on watching out for me. No, that sort of thing didn't exist in the Crucible. I couldn't escape, and when I tried, Savin just sneered and switched his grip to my throat — he was strong enough to lift me off my feet.

"You don't know when to quit, do you?" Savin asked, tilting his head as I started to squirm. His grip tightened, grew hotter. I watched as the veins down his arm began to glow. "They told me you were quiet, but I didn't realize they meant you were mute. Can you talk at all?"

My throat was tight, and not because he was starting to choke me. My tongue was dry in my mouth. The words were rough, barely more than a whisper. "Yes."

It hurt coming out, like ripping my heart out of my throat. I hadn't spoken in so long, I didn't even recognize my own voice, realize that I'd spoken, until after I saw the expression on Savin's face.

He grinned viciously. "Well, look at that. I bet that mouth of yours could do more interesting things besides talking."

I clenched my jaw, and despite myself, tried to shake him off. But the effort was only half-hearted, stunted by some internal force that suffocated insurrection.

Savin's grip clenched tighter, and I let out a whimper as he started to burn me. "What's wrong, sweetheart, you don't like me? The Crucible made you to serve. So, what happened to that obedience they promised us?"

I jerked in his grip. "Not... yours."

"Like hell you aren't," Savin snarled, his voice lowering as a few agents passed behind him. He drew
in closer, so our faces were inches away. I could smell his breath — sulfur and brimstone. There was a faint red glow in his eyes as they bored into mine. "If the Baron didn't want me playing with his toys, he shouldn't have picked one with such a pretty face."

And that's why. That's why I remembered him.

He drew in closer, and I was frozen in fear. It was forbidden for me to attack a superior without permission, when it wasn't a part of training. Savin knew this, and he seemed to have no problem taking advantage of it.

The memory shifted again. A part of my mind tweaked out — no, no, what happened next? How could I just let that happen to me? I had to know. Or maybe it was better that I didn't. Maybe this was my mind protecting me...

Something else. I was in another room, filled with computers, medical equipment. Vaguely, I wondered how big the Crucible was. How much of it had I seen already?

I was just walking through — passing doctors and scientists in white lab coats, too distracted by their own work on screens and clipboards to notice me or the Extremis soldiers I was escorted with. Brandt led the way, her red hair like some sort of guiding flare. I looked to my left, beyond the doctors, to the windows beyond.

Only they weren't windows. They were glass walls, cages. And that's when I first saw them.

A girl with red eyes and a boy with silver hair.

I didn't know what they were at the time, but I could see that they were different. Two teenagers, gangly and pale, in loose-fitting white clothes. The girl eye's flashed as she levitated old children's toys: dolls, building blocks, things she was too old to play with, but was all she had nonetheless. The objects were suspended in midair, swirling red magic seeping from her twisting, clawing fingers.

The boy had nothing to distract himself with. He was too busy bouncing off the walls of his enclosure. Unlike the girl, it was clear he was trying to escape, but didn't have the energy, the power. His cage was misted with the silvery trail he left behind. The scientists didn't seem alarmed by the banging noise he made, fighting against the glass. He was weak, malnourished. They both were.

The boy eventually collapsed against one wall, breathing hard, head hanging low in defeat. He dropped to his knees, pressed his hand against the glass between him and the girl. The girl was turned away from the wall, but then she turned around, reaching back for him. Their eyes met. There was no escape for them. Not for any of us.

Then, as though they sensed an onlooker, the boy and girl simultaneously turned their heads and met my gaze.

Chills went down my back — I couldn't remember the last time I felt a jolt of real fear, but that was it. The looks those two gave me was enough to make me skittish, and I quickly jerked my head back in front of me, returning to the march, and pretending as though I had never noticed them at all.

I felt someone nudge my back. One of Brandt's men, whispering: "They're creepy, right? Some pet project of the Baron's. Don't look those two in the eyes, they're Mutants. Who knows what they could do to you if you piss them off…"

I decided to take those words to heart, and didn't look behind me as we passed the cages. Still, even as we left, I could still feel their eyes, that boy and girl, burning holes into the back of my head.
"Amelia? Amelia! Look at me, please!"

"W-what...?" My tongue was thick in my mouth, dry as sandpaper. The Crucible faded, replaced by bright, natural light that hurt my eyes. I squinted, flinched away in pain. I expected my shoulder and sides to hurt, but they didn't — I wasn't in the training ring anymore. I was sitting, actually. On a nice, cushioned chair. I looked around, startled to find the metal walls and glass windows of a train around me.

It took me a long second to recover from my shock, to catch up with the thousand questions racing in my sluggish head. Voice rasping, I said, "Where am I? How did we get here?"

"You don't remember?" Wanda asked, and my eyes slid over to the seat next to me, where she sat. Wanda's brow was drawn in concern. I didn't realize her hand was on my face until I saw it, and I jumped. She withdrew her hand, fingers curling with regret. "Amelia, you were walking around, talking. The train was your idea. We're going to Paris. You don't remember?"

"I...no," I pressed a hand to my head, squeezing my eyes shut. "Why are we on the train?"

"You were scared. You didn't want to go on the cruise," Pietro. He was sitting in the seat opposite us. A train compartment. Civilian, comfortable, private. Intercity travel. Where were we going? "You were afraid the boat would blow up, like the last one. But you weren't...you."

At my questioning look, Wanda stammered with uncertainty, "Y-you were a different person. The way you acted, it was like you were back in the Crucible. You were a-a soldier again. You could barely speak. When you did speak, it was in Russian. You tried to run away from us. You were...angry, panicked a little. You kept saying a word. Extremis."

"Extremis?" I repeated, and my eyes widened when it finally hit me. "That's what they are. The man that went on the boat. That's why I recognized him."

"Who?" The twins looked utterly confused.

"Vulkan. Brandt, Savin, the others, that's what they're named," I said, shaking my head, letting it fall into my hands. "They're called Extremis soldiers, I guess, outside of the Komitet. I-I don't know what it means, or how I know, or why they'd attack Killian's ship... But I remember now."

"And it was them, that attacked the ship?" Wanda asked, her brow furrowing. "The same Komitet chasing us? That's what you were saying earlier, Amelia. It was like you were trying to get back to them. You were trying to get away from us."

"It was scary," Pietro said quietly, his gaze downcast. "It was like you didn't recognize us anymore. That we were your enemies."

"I thought it was just another memory, like on the train," I whispered, shaking my head. Had I been awake that whole time? How could I still function like that? "You're saying I was walking around in some sort of fugue state? I wasn't unconscious like last time?"

"No," Pietro and Wanda shook their heads in unison. Pietro said, "You almost got hit by a car. I had to pull you out of the way. You never even saw it. You barely even saw us."

"Well, lucky you guys were there, then," I said, wincing slightly as I slumped back in my seat. The
world passed by outside the window. We weren't in Nice anymore — instead, green countryside rolled past, massive vineyards and village clusters resting on sunny hilltops. It was too beautiful, too pure for what I was feeling right now. "If I'd been alone…"

I couldn't fathom it. As if falling unconscious at random moments was bad enough. My body, acting as someone else, someone strange, someone dangerous, now walking off of its own accord while my mind was trapped inside awful memories? That was going to be a bitch to deal with. What if I got hurt? What if I hurt someone else?

"You weren't," Wanda laid a hand on my arm, reassuring, and this time I didn't jump. "But I'm scared it might get worse. Your nose was bleeding the entire time. More than last time. It was hard to get anywhere without drawing attention. If we were attacked, we'd be in trouble."

"I'm sorry," I whispered, meaning it. And even worse, I put the twins in danger. "This other me, was she loyal to the Chairman?"

"We don't know," Wanda shrugged. "But it seemed like you were trying to get back to them. I was just afraid it might be permanent. I didn't know what to do."

"Well, if it happens again," I took a deep breath. At least the solution was simple. "If other me tries to hurt you, or turn against you, feel free to knock me out. Stop me anyway you can. Because I know right now I'd rather be out of commission than serving the Chairman. Okay?"

"Even if it means using my magic?"

"Yeah," I said, as the dread tightened in my stomach. "Even then."
"Let the Winter Take You"

*Memory fades as the snow falls*

*Close your eyes and rest, soldier.*

(art by me :)
Hope you caught that little cameo of an important character :) They'll be appearing fully quite soon...
Chapter Twenty-Six

Chapter Summary

Who Will Save You Now//Les Friction
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vI0FETSHAv4

(this song really only applies to the second half of this chapter)

Chapter Twenty-Six

✮

We reached Paris by midnight.

I grew up in the City that Never Sleeps, but Paris certainly lived up to its own nickname: The City of Lights. It was pitch black by the time Paris first came into view from the train windows, and I couldn't rip my eyes away. Even the twins were awed, and we crowded against the windows, watching as the city grew closer and closer.

Paris was radiant. Millions of lights, glowing, warm and flashing — people were still up, the city was still awake. There were no massive skyscrapers like there were in New York, but I couldn't think of anything else as majestic as the Eiffel Tower, black metal framework glittering against the sky.

Seeing it, I felt tears spring into my eyes. Mom always wanted to go to Paris. The one time I actually go, and she wasn't here with me.

It didn't even seem completely night once we were in the city itself. Low cloud cover meant a lot of light reflected back down on the city, giving the sky a warm grayish glow.

I felt light-headed, getting off the train. This didn't feel real. Me, in Paris? I'd only dreamed of this before. But now, here I was, in some magical, beautiful city with two fugitives, not necessarily running from the law, but not heading towards it, either.

I was still wrapping my head around the fact that this was somehow my idea. Getting scared of boats because of the attack on the Adelaide, I could understand, even for my altered psyche. But why Paris? Why head further north? Why not west, to the Atlantic?

Whatever the Soldatka had in mind, though, it seemed to be working out so far. I guess of all the places to go, Paris wasn't the worse. At least Other Me didn't try to hurt or lose the twins.

If I woke up without them, I'm not sure what I'd do.

Pietro and Wanda, for the most part, seemed to like the idea as well — once they saw Paris, too. I guess it's just one of those cities you fall in love with at first sight.

Eventually, the train stopped and we deboarded. The train station was aboveground and brightly lit,
stainless steel and huge industrial lighting. Too bright, in fact, that I felt exposed, and I could pick out every security camera we passed under. As tempting as it was to look around, maybe visit the shops and cafes inside, I wanted to leave as soon as possible.

I couldn't shake the feeling that we were being watched. It had been there earlier, when we were in the train cabin, but the closed door and muted noise had created a small bubble of safety. But out in the open, suddenly surrounded by strangers, Parisians and tourists alike,

A chilly, howling breeze coursed throughout the station, billowing coats and hats, and we followed to an open walkway outside.

A crowd of tourists passed by. I followed as Pietro led the way, and I glanced over the faces as we weaved through them.

Red hair. Scarred lips. Flashing eyes.

I snapped my head around, heart skipping a beat. What the hell —?

Brandt. Her wicked smile and knowing gaze. But it wasn't possible. I'd seen her crushed beneath the avalanche on the train.

As soon as I saw her, she disappeared. I came to an abrupt stop, scanning the crowd again.

No one with red hair.

A ghost.

"Amelia?" Wanda called after me. Her hand on my arm. I whipped back around, trying to catch my breath. Her face, very real, brought me back to reality. "What's wrong? You look sick."

"It's...it's nothing," I said, pressing a hand to my temple as I continued forward again, my footsteps heavy. It was my paranoia, my exhaustion playing tricks on me. "Just seeing things."

Wanda didn't look entirely convinced, but accepted my answer nonetheless. Still, she remained by my side as we left the train station, making sure not to lose track of me again. Normally I'd be annoyed by the babysitting, but I couldn't blame her, either. After what happened in Nice, I'd keep a closer eye on me, too.

"Where do we go now?" Pietro asked, as we caught up to him on the street. Once more, I remembered Paris was somehow my idea; I stared back at him blankly, no clue what the other half of Other Me's plan was.

"Oh, I know!" Wanda piped up, saving me at the last moment. "We should sleep in the fanciest hotel Paris has!"

"What?" My relief was immediately replaced with bewilderment. "Why?"

"Because I want to," Wanda shrugged. "Because we can. I thought you'd like the idea — a fancy hotel is the last place the Komitet, the soldiers will look for us."

Apparently, I still looked doubtful. Wanda tapped me on the arm, skipping ahead, "Trust me, you will like it! Just follow me."

Ten minutes later, we stood in the lobby of the Hotel Ambassador; three ragged, dirty teenagers in twice-hand-ed-down clothes, who hadn't showered in over a day, standing in front of desk in a room
that was bigger than Douglass’ gym. A middle-aged couple, waiting in on a nearby couch, glared at us from their mink-lined coats. I met their gazes once before studying the floor, embarrassed by the holes in my jeans, exposing bruised knees.

Turned out Wanda had the right idea after all.

The old couple just stared at us, in silent offense, as the desk clerk nodded dreamily to Wanda's request - she, speaking in Sokovian, him in French. I realized I understood him, but I wasn't entirely sure the twins did. Maybe Wanda's telepathy/mind control powers could cross the language barrier. Handy.

The woman let out a harrumph as the desk clerk stood up and handed us a pair of keys — no money had been exchanged, although I doubted the clerk was even aware of that fact.

The man leaned over and whispered in French into his wife's ear, "The sort of rabble they let in these days. People like them shouldn't even be let pass the front door."

And just like that, all self-consciousness was gone in a moment. My head snapped up, and I fixed the couple with a brilliant smile, and asked in perfect French: "This place is so lovely! Do you come here often?"

The couple gawked silently at me, taken aback, faces paling in mortification at being caught. I wondered if it was the fluidity of my French, or maybe the uncanny accent. I had only spent a few days in France, but I'd already been mistaken a few times for being a native.

I would never accept what the Crucible did to me, what they taught me, but I had to admit, it was damn satisfying to knock some snobby rich people back on their heels.

I couldn't help but continue to smile a little as a bellman was called to escort us (and our lack of baggage) to our penthouse suite. I could feel the daggers at our backs as the rich couple watched us go. I wondered if they'd complain about us staying here, how our mere presence offended them.

I had already forgotten about them by the time we left the elevator on the top floor. The bellman ushered us with a sleepy smile and faintly glowing eyes to our room. The last to enter, I was just about to close the door when I thought of something, and turned to the bellman, asking, "Is it possible for you to get me a laptop or computer to use? It's kind of urgent."

"Oui, mademoiselle. We only use the latest technology here at the Ambassador."

"Awesome! Merci," I said with a grin, resisting the urge to fist-pump in front of the bellman. He was already running off to fetch my request when I closed the door.

Turning around, I completely forgot about the laptop as soon as I took in the penthouse suite.

The floor was marble, but practically disappeared under the austere gold-and-mahogany furniture. A glass table was surrounded by overstuffed seats; on the glass was giant platter of fruit, a jar of two dozen white roses, and what looked like a large box of chocolates. Doors on either side led to what looked like separate bedrooms. There was a small bar to my right, small bottles gleaming in a variety of colors.

Directly across from me was a view of Paris to die for. The Eiffel Tower glittered from only half-a-mile away, a golden beacon in the center of the city. Wanda had already made herself comfortable on the chaise lounge, while Pietro had wandered off to explore the rest of the suite.

"This is too much," I said, as I gawked up at the coffered ceilings, the intricate designs, brocade
"I think it's just enough," Wanda said with a smile, looking mighty pleased at my reaction. She held up her hands, said, "Imagine living like this, every day. To have the world at your fingertips. This must be what it's like to be Tony Stark."

"Among other things, I suppose," I said, somewhat reluctantly, trying not to look too deep into the bitterness of her tone. I wasn't quite sure what Wanda wanted to get out of this; a look at how the other half lived? Some better understanding of Tony Stark, who I had no doubt she still despised with every fiber of her being. "Although I think it might be a bit more complicated than a great view and unlimited room service."

"You are defending a man who doesn't deserve the effort," Wanda said after me, as I headed towards the TV. I ignored her as I took the remote and turned it on.

Settling on a nearby ottoman, I flicked to a French twenty-four hours news channel. The reporter was talking exactly what I expected her to be talking about.

"...far the number of casualties has still remained undeclared, but reports are saying there are numerous deaths and injuries. Rescue efforts are still underway, trying to reach those still trapped in the wreckage of the HMS Adelaide." The woman reported against a black sky. The titular ship was behind her, a hazy orange glow in the background, mingled with red-and-blue flashing lights. The reporter's face matched the grave situation at hand. Someone handed her a card, and she said, "I've just received word; the terrorist known as the Mandarin has taken responsibility for this attack! This would make it the third attack this month by him and his affiliates the Ten Rings, and the twelve just this year, not counting the numerous attacks attributed to him in the past. The Mandarin has made no demands, only states that he is here to teach the world a lesson. Gilles, I fear that the Mandarin is only getting bolder. There seems to be no end to his reign of terror."

The camera switched back to the anchorman at his desk. "Thank you, Marie. From what we've learned from the police so far, the HMS Adelaide seems to be a random target, a cargo ship inbound from Australia. There seems to be no political angle in this attack, just another attempt to strike fear into the hearts of the French people and the world beyond. The U.N. is already in talks with the Avengers, who have aided in international affairs before. We will keep you updated as new events arise..."

"I think we should head to London," I called out, my eyes still on the TV screen.

"What?" Pietro popped his head out of the bathroom. "Why?"

I turned around in my spot to look at them. "I think we should head to London after this. Find those reporters who were in Sokovia. They were English, right? So, they'll be home now. We can find them, and tell them what really happened in Nice."

"You mean," Pietro frowned, tilted his head. "About Aldrich Killian?"

"He lied about where he was," I gestured to the TV screen. Dr. Killian himself was still speaking from what looked like the porch of a tropical beach house. "Why would he do that? Why are the Komitet targeting him? Why are the Ten Rings claiming responsibility? Something weird is going on, and I think they should know."

I was still reeling from what happened earlier today. The attack, the black out, just trying to figure..."
everything out. Things I didn't have an answer to, things that I might never have an answer to. But that sense of helplessness only increased my desire to do something.

"I'm still going home," I added. "That's not changing. But right now, I'm starting to think France isn't as safe as I thought."

Pietro's eyes went to the TV, squinting a little. "The Ten Rings? They sound familiar."

"They're the ones who kidnapped Tony Stark four years ago," I said.

Wanda snapped her fingers, sneering at Pietro. "Ha! Of course, something like this is Tony Stark's fault."

I frowned at her. "No offense, but I think you're jumping the gun a little. Right now, its possible Killian has more to do with this than Stark."

Wanda just sniffed, shrugging her shoulders. "It just seems oddly coincidental, I think. If he is not at fault, then why isn't he doing anything to help?"

I was about to retort, but a knock on the door interrupted me. Throwing her one last disgruntled look, I stood up and got the door.

The bellman, still under Wanda's thrall, stood on the other side. He presented a silver laptop on a cloth-covered cart. Right before I closed the door, I added to the bellman, "Can I have a map, too, please? Thank you."

As I accepted it, I heard Pietro ask from behind me, "Forget Tony Stark, who are the Avengers?"

"I... I don't know," I said, realizing I had no reference point on that. I realized that this had been the first time I'd heard of them, too. "I've never heard of them before."

I glanced down at the laptop. Well, I actually had a way of finding out now.

Not wasting a second, I took the laptop and settled at the other end of Wanda's couch. Opening the screen, I waited for it to boot up. Wanda scorched in next to me to see what I was doing.

Her fingers skimmed the smooth metal edges of the laptop. "It's so...small."

Pietro leaned in over my shoulder, and I angled my head away as he reached to press his hands against the keyboard, letting out a sniff. "Not Cyrillic. I can't read English words."

"Put that on the list of things I'll have to teach you," I said, as I opened the browser and typed 'Avengers' into the search bar. "Let's see what Google has to say..."

Turned out, Google had a lot to say.

The first thing that popped up was an image — one I instantly recognized from New York. A silver skyscraper that I recognized to be Stark Tower, only it no longer had the logo on the side. Instead, it had been replaced with a giant 'A' symbol, locked in a circle. Beneath it, the tagline read: **Avengers Towers was finally christened today, after months of repairing the damage incurred during the Incident...**

Wanda prodded me, and I jolted a little, before remembering to narrate what I read. It was slow going, but they couldn't read it any better than I could. Their expressions were as confused as I felt, and it wasn't getting any better when I clicked on the first link that popped up, from the New York
This time, beside the article, was a picture of Tony Stark and — "Holy shit, that's Captain America!"

"Captain America?" Pietro angled the screen so he could see it better. "What? How is he still alive?"

"I-I don't know, just give me a second," I quickly scanned the article to give me a chance to absorb the information before I painstakingly dictated it to the twins. "The Avengers team was formed by Tony Stark and Captain America during the Battle of New York, locally known as 'the Incident', on May 4th, 2012, when aliens attacked the city. This team of extraordinary individuals, including acclaimed scientist Bruce Banner and the mysterious demigod-like being known only as Thor, gathered together to save the city in its moment of crisis, averting both a terrible invasion and a nuclear disaster. Other members of the team are only known by the code names, and have been avoiding the public light; Hawkeye, a sharp-shooting archer only spotted from a distance, and the Black Widow, a red-haired woman who is personally responsible for closing the portal above the city. Captain America is also going by his old war moniker; the organization SHIELD has kept his true identity private, even after all these years."

"So, they're a bunch of warmongers playing at hero," Wanda scoffed derisively as we continued to go through more articles and news sites. She flicked her hair and stood up, apparently annoyed with the matter. "Fantastic. It is good to see that they have kept their focus on America, and not on countries in greater need."

"I'm sure it's not like that," I said, but my voice was weak. I was still trying to digest all of this. The Avengers? The Incident? Aliens?! What the hell happened while I was in the Crucible? "I can't believe so much changed in just two years. Are you guys telling me you've heard none of this?"

"We were locked up, like you," Pietro pointed out. "We knew nothing of our own country, much less the outside world. As if they would ever tell us."

I just pressed a hand to my forehead, scrolling through more and more images of New York City, my home, covered in rubble. Crashed alien ships, dead bodies, ruins, aftermath of the battle. Video clips of the Hulk catching a fallen Iron Man. The launch of the nuclear missile, before being diverted into the massive shimmering purple-black portal that gave me vertigo just from looking at it on a computer screen.

There were other images, too, reports of lesser-known, local heroes also aiding in the Battle. Mostly civilians, firefighters and cops going above and beyond to save people, as well as a strange red-and-blue suited figure swinging through the streets, face covered by a mask. Most of the video was blurry, caught on handhelds and done in the midst of panicking crowds and aliens raining down all around them.

This wall-crawling, web-slinging figure appeared in other articles, with clearer photos and what appeared to be a suit upgrade and, finally, a name. The Spectacular Spider-Man saves the day again! This hero, after making a name for himself at the Battle of New York, now seems to operate on a daily basis in the tri-state area. No word yet on his affiliation with the Avengers…

"So." I said out loud, because nothing else was coming to mind. As if I thought my day could get any weirder. "I guess that happened."

I couldn't really comprehend my city getting attacked. Again. The untold amounts of damage. The fact that, apparently, only seventy-two (!) people died in the Battle. The 'Rise of the Superhero' as one TIME’s article put it. The fact that the strange and the unusual were now becoming commonplace in everyone's lives.
The world was not the same as I left it. Would home still be as I remembered it, when I got back? They say that most of the city was repaired following the Battle, but how true could that be?

And, above all, what did these SHIELD guys have to do with it?

All I learned was that they were a secret organization that recently came out to the public, after being partially exposed in the Battle. Apparently, it's kinda hard to explain a giant helicarrier flying off the bay when it's invisible shields go down.

They seemed like the good guys, though. They backed up the Avengers, especially in the aftermath, when they got strafed by both federal and international figures. The Avengers saved New York; And they were here to stay.

Eventually, Pietro lost interest in the matter as well. Like Wanda, he was disillusioned with the idea of heroes, the unity, and the world-protecting the Avengers promoted. But it wasn't their city that just got attacked (well, okay, it happened six months ago, but it still felt like it just happened to me). It wasn't their family they were worried about. Was Mom okay? Was that why the phone wasn't working when I called? What about Peter, Aunt May, and Uncle Ben? I could only pray that they weren't one of the unlucky seventy-two that died.

Thinking of Peter reminded me of my original intention of getting this laptop. Although it was the middle of the night, and both of the twins had gone asleep; at one point I looked up and saw the map I requested lying on the table in front of me. When that had happened? I didn't remember the door knocking.

Either way, I was still wide awake, and my idea gave me a new burst of energy. I hesitated only for a moment before logging into my old email account.

I wasn't sure what I was expecting. I mean, okay, the 567 unread messages weren’t a surprise; most of it was subscription emails to things I no longer cared about at this point. I filtered through them, narrowed the field to just school emails, and people I knew.

567 emails dropped down to 4.

Three of them were from September that I remembered and hadn't opened yet. Two from Peter about a homework assignment. One from Michelle about a missing pencil case. And one message from school.

None of them were after September.

The Subject line only read: The Passing of a Student

My mouth went dry. My hand hesitated over the touchpad.

I didn't blink as I clicked on it.

---

September 27th, 2010

To: The Douglass Community

From: Principal Rooney, Board of Directors
Re: The Passing of a Student

It is with great sadness that I write to inform you the passing of Amelia Fletcher, member of the Class of 2014. She passed away this morning at Metro General hospital, after fighting a hard battle against lung and heart failure, brought on by a terrible case of tuberculosis.

Amelia was a gifted Honors student here at Douglass. She was well known for her helpfulness in the computer lab, and for her love of movies. She was a native New Yorker, and lived in Hell's Kitchen.

During this time of loss, the Frederick Douglass Middle School will provide counseling and grief support services for our students and other members of our community.

Our thoughts and prayers are with the family, fellow students, friends, and teachers of Amelia. We are all saddened by the loss of one of our own. Please support each other during this difficult time.

I kept staring at the final words, long after I finished reading them. The screen grew blurry, and it took me a moment to finally shake my head and wipe at my eyes.

I didn't have more emails because they thought I was dead. They weren't looking for me. They never bothered to try. Never had a reason to.

And Mom? Oh, my god. I couldn't even imagine... I had to tell her. I had to let her know I was still alive.

But even as I opened a new email, I stopped myself before I could type anything. What was I doing? I couldn't contact anyone. The Crucible faked my dead for a reason. Someone had tapped into Peter's phone. Someone was watching us. Someone was probably watching this account right now.

If I wrote an email, then they'd know that I was alive, that I was active. They could probably trace the exact location I sent it, too.

I was practically vibrating in my seat, a combination of frustration and pain. I had to do something. I had to tell someone. But was it worth it? Could I really wait until I actually got home?

Then, in the corner of my inbox, a green dot popped up.

Ned Leeds was active.

Oh shit. I forgot about my status.

The mouse pointer flew across the screen.

I wasn't fast enough.

A chat bubble came up.

NL: Who is this?

NL: How did you get on this account?

I stared at the messages, unable to move. My fingers were splayed, rigid, over the keys. What do I
do? What do I say? Ned had already seen I was on. He already knew someone was looking through my emails.

For a long minute, Ned made no further messages. I hoped against hope that he'd just leave it alone. What time was it over there? Had to be nine in the evening. Just go to bed and forget you ever saw this.

But computer beeped with another message.

**NL:** You know its super bad karma to hack into a dead person's account.

**NL:** Fine, don't reply to me. I hope Mia comes back to haunt you.

A startled laugh burst from my lips, and I clapped a hand over my mouth before I could accidentally wake up the twins. As much as it hurt not to respond, it felt so good to be talking to Ned again. Even if he didn't know it was me.

I scanned the keys. Maybe I could send a message…

I just had to choose it carefully. Something anyone spying on us wouldn't know the meaning of.

In a moment, I had it.

**AEF:** Show me the way home, honey.

I got a reply almost instantly.

**NL:** WTF

**NL:** wtf holy shit youre real

**AEF:** Show me the way home, honey.

**NL:** yoooo wtf? Wait what does that mean?

**AEF:** Show me the way home, honey.

It was all I was willing to type. Nothing more, nothing less. But repeating it meant Ned would remember. It meant he'd tell someone.

**NL:** If this is some sort of sick joke, it's not funny

**NL:** Im sooo doxxing you if i knew how

I had just gotten up from my seat when Ned started a video chat.

The window popped up and the webcam light turned on. My first instinct was to jump out of the way before the camera could catch me.

"Hello?" Came Ned's tinny voice over the speakers as I hit the floor. All his feed got was my empty seat and the wall behind me. "Hey, I know you're there! I can hear you! Who is this? Who the hell are you? What are you doing with Mia's email?"

I army-crawled around the table, reaching up behind the laptop and slamming it shut.
"Don't think I won't find out" —” were Ned's last words before the computer shut down.

I heaved a sigh, hanging my head. That was a close one.

✮✮✮

I was a little sad to be leaving Paris so soon.

But my sadness was taking a backseat to my anxiety. It had been twelve hours since my chat with Ned, and I was a wound-up ball of nervous energy. Needless to, I didn't get much sleep.

I managed to catch up on the train to London. I had heard of the Chunnel that went until the English Channel between London and Paris, but seeing it in person was way cooler than I imagined. The train ride itself was only an impressive twenty minutes. I had actually been hoping it'd be longer, so I could get more rest.

So, we left the Ambassador Hotel at 8AM, and arrived in London at 7:30AM… I thought I was going crazy when I read the time on the station's clock, until I remembered London is in a different time-zone than Paris. Unbelievable. To think it had taken half a day just to cross all of France, and in less time than it took for me to get to school in Manhattan, we were already in another country.

"Are you okay?" Wanda asked on the train ride, pressing a hand over my tapping fingers. "You didn't get any sleep, did you?"

I threw her a wan smile. "Sorry. Sleeping is kinda...difficult right now."

Pietro looked quizzical. "Nightmares?"

"Memories."

"Oh," The twins nodded in unison. Pietro just shook his head. "I do not think you have much to worry. You would not wake up a different person."

"But how can we be sure?"

He didn't have an answer for that. But I didn't want to upset the about that, so I continued, "It's not just that, really. I, um, I spoke to one of my old friends. From home."

"What?" Wanda stared at me, shocked. "You did? How?"

"It was through the email server. We were both on at the same time. I forgot to turn my status invisible. I just…" I tapped my forehead with my fist, still angry at myself. "I was so stupid. Ned, my friend, he tried to start a video chat. Almost caught my face."

"Does he know it's you?" Pietro asked, brow pulling together nervously.

"No, I don't think so," I said with a shrug. The windows outside the train were dark, interspersed with the occasional flash of light. We were going over a hundred miles an hour inside the Chunnel, but I hardly felt a thing in my seat. "I couldn't, really. I still think my family is being watched at home. And maybe my email, too, I can't be too careful. But I sent Ned a message. He won't understand it, but Peter will."
"Your cousin?" Wanda remembered. "Ah. And what will he do once he knows?"

"Not sure. Tell someone. My mom, hopefully." I winced internally. "They all think I'm dead. The Crucible faked my death, so no one would look for me afterwards."

Pietro only nodded grimly. "They are clever that way. They know how to mask their tracks. And you're a better agent to them if you have no more records, yes? You become a ghost."

That didn't make me feel much better. "Yeah, that too," I agreed, a little disgruntled.

"Think positive," Wanda punched me lightly on the arm. "Your plan is working so far. We are close to Frink and Crain now. We see them, and they help us to America, yes?"

"That's the idea, yeah," I said, smiling a little. "I don't think they're gonna tell us not after everything's that's happenend."

"Exactly!"

That thought spurred me onwards, as we eventually departed the train, to London on the other side. It was even colder here than in France, but not quite as bad as Sokovia. I kept a tight hold on my backpack; you could only take in so much culture shock in a day, and my eyes were a little out of whack, adjusting to the sudden English words everywhere, after days (months) of seeing and hearing everything but my native language.

I had found Frink's address online, and made a route to it on the map I'd gotten from the hotel. The quickest route to there from the station. No more detours; we'd get food on the way. There was no way we were getting sidetracked, especially since this was my idea, and it would take us that much longer to get home because of it.

We traveled by foot, on the off-chance things went bad and we had to make an escape. It was easier to get away from danger when we didn't have to get out of a car or bus first. Trains were claustrophobic enough as it was.

Still, I didn't mind that my chosen route also took us sightseeing a bit. We had to cross the Thames, and it just so happened that the closest bridge between here and Frink's was Tower Bridge, by far one of London's more iconic landmarks, and another thing I could cross off my bucket list.

I didn't think I'd take my bucket list so seriously. Before, I had made one half-heartedly. I'd knew I'd die eventually, but never with the hopes of ever leaving New York City in my sickly condition. Now, I was still probably going to die, just in more terrible ways; so, the bucket list still had prominence in my mind.

It was midmorning by the time we reached the bridge, after making a pit stop for some bagels and coffee. We (and by we, I mean Pietro) had eaten all the food in our suite before leaving, but nervousness and excitement always whetted the appetite.

We blended easily in the bustling crowds of London, which looked a lot like the bustling crowds of France. We still looked like we were dragged across the entire country of Sokovia, but at least I felt better. As Tower Bridge came into view, I thought about what I would say to Julia Frink; especially after reading that TIME article. I wondered if she was in any danger, too, because of what happened.

The walkway passed through on either side of Tower Bridge, with lanes of traffic in the center. Although a chilly wind coursed through the metal and stone framework, the sun was warm, gleaming down from clear skies.
Despite their earlier hesitation, the twins both seemed to be enjoying the day. Pietro had a spring in his step and Wanda's laughter sparkled in the air. I walked a few paces behind them, and seeing them smile made me smile. This was turning out better than I thought. I never imagined to actually be enjoying the moment, while currently being on the run, so far away from home...

I checked the map again, the route I outlined in red sharpie. After crossing Tower Bridge, it should only take us twenty minutes to walk to Frink's apartment.

Cars passed relatively slowly around us. Pietro made some comment about being faster than them, but Wanda pointed out the 32km speed limit, and that he'd probably get ticketed for using his powers on the bridge.

I would've laughed at this and Pietro's incredulous reaction, had I not noticed something out of the corner of my eye.

A large freighter ship heading towards the bridge.

I glanced by it at first, then did a double take. Not only was the freighter, laden with stacks of large storage containers, awfully close to the bridge — less than a quarter mile out — it was coming in fast. I tried to estimate its speed. The freighter looked like it would pass under the bridge in just under a few minutes.

Only it wouldn't pass under the bridge, because it was too tall.

I frowned, looked around me. The bridge was packed with people and vehicles. We were between the two towers, too far away from either side of the Thames to make it off in time. What was happening? Shouldn't the bridge be clearing for ship passage? Was that even possible now?

I kept watching the freighter for a few more seconds, just waiting for it to slow down.

But it didn't.

"Amelia?" Wanda called — they had stopped twenty feet ahead, realizing I was no longer following them. Wanda cupped her hands over her mouth to be heard over the noise of traffic. "Amelia, what's wrong?"

I pointed to the ship, trotting up to them. "Look! The ship's coming in too fast!"

Pietro and Wanda's heads swiveled towards the south end of the river. Pietro asked, "Uh, is it supposed to be doing that?"

"I don't think so," I said, already scanning the area, trying to think of something to do. It was possibly we could get off the bridge in time, but what about all the civilians?

Other people were noticing as well — but instead of hurrying like they should, they just stopped and stared, pointing at the incoming ship as if it were some strange wonder rather than an immediate threat. The crowd was getting thicker now — traffic was slowing, too. I couldn't tell if it was a jam up ahead, or if the drivers were interested in the ship, too. Either way, it wasn't making the situation any better.

"Should we do something?" Wanda asked as I shifted past her, catching sight of a black-and-white uniform. An officer, maybe police or just bridge security, was standing amongst the crowd, hand on his shoulder radio. I caught the tell end of his call as I got closer.

"...we must clear the bridge. Is there any radio contact with the ship? The bridge is not clear for lift, I
The officer said into the radio, his voice rising to a shout as the ship kept getting closer and closer. He paused, as if caught in a moment of shock, then demanded, "Hello? Hello, can anyone hear me?"

I stopped dead in my tracks. I didn't need to speak to the policeman to know that his radio signal was dead.

*Shit.* A cold prickle of dread crawled down my spine. This wasn't right. None of this was right.

Wanda and Pietro were directly behind me. I didn't look at them when I suddenly said, "We need to get off. Now."

This time, the twins didn't question me, merely cast worried looks over the bridge as they came up to my side. Pietro said, "I will take Wanda, run to the other side, and then come back for —"

He was cut off by shouting, and we spun around to see another policeman sprinting down the bridge, waving his arms. "Clear the way! Clear the way!"

Beneath me, I felt a tremor. The ship was less than fifty feet away. A rush of people pushed back, catching me off guard. I was nearly thrown off my feet three different people ran into me.

Pietro had already taken Wanda's arm. I stumbled to catch myself, then shouted to the twins, "Go! Go before it —"

**WHOOM.**

Ahead of us, the bridge exploded.

Fire and smoke erupted from right beneath the tower. A truck rear ended a taxi. Pietro stumbled.

Then another explosion went off behind us.

My head snapped in the other direction, just in time to see a police car tossed into the air. It crashed upside down over the pedestrian lane. Its sirens went off, ringing uselessly.

It joined the screams filling the air.

Cars that hadn't already stopped were now slamming the brakes. They piled on either end of the bascules, unable to pass underneath the towers — now in flames.

The pedestrians turned into a stampede, scattering every which way. At first, I thought the explosions had scared them.

Then the freighter smashed into the bridge.

A massive, unholy screech ripped through the air. The bridge kicked beneath my feet, and I was knocked flat to the ground.

The barge's radio tower hit first - upon collision, it bent back, cutting through the guardrail and tarmac before folding underneath the bridge.

The ship released its horn, as if the bridge could magically move out of the way. But the bridge didn't move. The ship still didn't stop. It had too much momentum.

The containers hit. Metal and stone flew into the air. The containers attached to nothing, snapped back at impact, before behind shoved off. They came crashing down onto the road.
The ship carried straight on through, cars and containers plowed aside. I cried out as giant metal boxes fell around me. One landed behind me only a foot away, sending me into the air upon landing — like some twisted version of a trampoline.

I hit the ground again; taking the brunt of it on my chest, I was winded instantly. Then I saw the shadow, and rolled out of the way just before another container could fall and crush me underneath.

I covered my head as the bridge's suspension rolled and jumped. I tried calling out for Wanda and Pietro — I'd lost sight of them only a second ago, but the entire geography of the bridge had changed in that short amount of time.

They couldn't hear me, anyways. The air was a cacophony of more explosions, grinding metal and more people screaming.

I squeezed my eyes shut, too terrified to see what was happening. I just curled up into a ball and prayed that the twins got out of here in time.

Tower Bridge shuddered and groaned as the freighter tore right through it, then onto the other side.

Things stopped falling. I felt the ground tilt beneath me. Cars and containers creaked and groaned, sliding a few feet — but they didn't fall into the river beneath. The sound dipped a few decibels; a small moment of peace after a disaster.

I risked a glance up. At first, I couldn't see anything. There was too much smoke, turning a once sunny, cool day into something dark and acrid. Rubble fell off my shoulders as I picked myself up. Rubble and glass fell from above - the overhead walkways had bent under the crash, but hadn't fallen yet.

I turned to face the way I came. What was once a serene, flat roadway was now a gaping hole ten meters across, jagged edges dipping down to the black river below. Pieces of tarmac and concrete swung from torn rebar and steel.

People were crying out. I couldn't see them in the wreckage. The fallen containers stood twenty feet over me, like the walls of a maze. Underneath them, cars and trucks had been crushed into lumps of metal.

In the distance, sirens shrieked.

For a moment, all was still. The bridge was holding. Just barely.

"Amelia!" Wanda's voice echoed off the metal, and I spun around, nearly falling, caught in a daze.

Wanda appeared around a container, her pale, stricken face covered in soot. There was a new gash across her arm, her knees were bloodied, but otherwise she looked perfectly fine.

Behind her was Pietro, wiping at his face. "We saw the boxes fall - we thought you were crushed!"

"I-I'm fine," I stuttered, my hand shaking as I wiped at my mouth. My palm came away bloody, and a new burning appeared on my cheek. Something must've hit me and I hadn't noticed. "J-just a little shaken. I-I thought I told you guys to get out of here —"

A bullet ripped by my face.

Pietro knocked me down just in time.
My head cracked against the concrete. By the time my vision cleared, the helicopter had risen from beneath the bridge. It now hovered over us, at the other end of the bridge — the only way off.

Three ropes whipped beneath its hull. I hadn't seen anyone get out.

Pietro dragged me against the wall of one container, pressing our backs to it. He said something, but I didn't catch it. My ears were still ringing.

Wanda was on the other side. Her eyes were wide, brilliant red, pupils' tiny pinpricks. Her expression was one of utter terror.

"Not just the Komitet!" She said, apparently responding to Pietro's earlier comment, as another bullet ricocheted off of a car a few feet away. I didn't see any civilians around. It was just us, and whoever dropped out of the helicopter.

"It's him!" Wanda cried, as Pietro peered over the corner. "Pietro, they sent him!"

Pietro ducked back, just before a spray of bullets glanced off the side of our cover. His only reply was a string of Sokovian curses.

"Who?" I asked, but Wanda was utterly petrified; I was too curious not to look. I leaned over Pietro, stuck my head out from behind the container.

The way ahead was covered in smoke and flames. We were too low to the ground; at first, all I saw was more debris, the dark outlines of cars and trucks, left abandoned in the chaos. The looming black cloud from the explosion rose higher and higher into the air, obscuring the bridge tower from view.


They took cover behind cars. A strategic move. We were effectively cornered.

And then, someone stepped out.

He hadn't been hiding to begin with. There was something sinister, in the almost casual way the man appeared from the smoke, materializing like some sort of ghost.

He was dressed entirely in black. Tactical gear, leather and buckles. Footsteps even, heavy with purpose. Long hair hung over a shadowed face. In both hands, he carried what looked like a sniper rifle, its long barrel pointed towards the ground. I realized, one of his arms was strangely bare, uncovered.

Then he stepped out into the sun, and the light glared off metal, blinding and bright.

My heart skipped a beat when I finally understood what I saw. He had a metal arm. One single red star painted on his shoulder.

I couldn't breathe.

Wanda finally gasped: "It's the Winter Soldier!"
'Glad to be Alive' Selfie

I meant to post this in a previous chapter but I forgot xP
The Winter Soldier.

The name echoed in my head like some forgotten nightmare. For a long moment, I couldn't move, too stunned by the moment. It took Pietro grabbing me by the waist and pulling me back for me to recollect myself.

I fell back against the wall of the container, strangely breathless. My thoughts were running a million miles a minute. Already I could feel the drag of exhaustion. I had only gotten three hours of sleep in the last day. I wasn't running on peak condition — I never had been, since I first woke up in Sokovia, but I was really feeling it now.

So close to home.

This was a disaster.

"W-what do we do?" I asked, unable to clamp down on my stutter. I was too afraid, too caught off guard. I knew nothing about this new player on the field. "H-how do we f-fight him?"

"You don't fight the Winter Soldier!" Pietro retorted, in the tone of a person regarding another like they were an idiot. "You can't! He's unstoppable!"

"What do you mean? What is he? Komitet? Extremis?"

"No, he's worse," Wanda said, her pale face gaunt. Her red eyes glowered with intensity. "The KGB's greatest assassin. He was there at the Crucible. You can't fight him, Amelia! You can only run, and hide, and pray he never finds you!"

"Well, he found us!" I pointed out, my voice rising an octave. I had unwittingly accumulated the twin's panic into my own. How could two powerful Mutants - one who could tear atoms apart with her mind, another who could outrun bullets - be so terrified of one man? "We need to get out of here while we still can!"

"How?" Wanda demanded. "We're trapped!"

I swallowed my panic for a moment, scanned the area, the sky, anything that could be helpful. But there was nowhere to go. None of us could jump the gap to the other side of the bridge - even if we could, there was a massive fire on the other end, and another on our side. The sky was a haze of gray and blue, the air filled with the loud beats of the chopper blades. A few more gunshots rang out.

And time was running out. Sooner or later, the Winter Soldier — whatever he was — would catch up.
"All right, all right," I said, nodding my head, trying to get my thoughts in order, form some sort of plan. "From what I saw, there are about a dozen men on the ground, not including, um, him, the Winter Soldier. Pietro, you and I are going to deal with them. We'll flank from either side, while Wanda goes for the chopper. You're the only one who can attack from down here."

"And the Winter Soldier?" Pietro asked.

"Like you said, we can't fight him," I replied, pulling myself up to a crouch. "So, we're not going to try. After you and I clear the way, you're going to take Wanda and get the hell out of here. I'll follow."

"You sure?" Pietro frowned. "No plan survives first contact. Especially not with the Winter Soldier!"

I could only cast him a wan smile. "What, you got any better ideas?"

"Well, we can always jump," Pietro suggested, gesturing to the end of the bridge, the freezing Thames below. "It's been ten years, but I still know how to swim."

I paused, considered it - the fall looked huge from this angle. I wasn't entirely sure we'd survive it. Not to mention the cold water, and if any of us were strong enough swimmers to get through it - then looked back at him. "We'll call it Plan B, okay?"

Pietro nodded once before darting over to the other side of the bridge. He ducked and weaved around cars and fallen containers, avoiding a smattering of gunfire. A small blast went off behind him — someone had a grenade launcher. Perfect.

Wanda found proper cover behind a fallen car, getting as close to the gap as she could without falling — and maintaining enough distance from the Winter Soldier without being seen. I shared a nod with her as well before moving into position.

Keeping my cover, another shipping container, to my right, I headed to the far-left edge of the bridge. Behind me, I heard a blast as Wanda fired off a blast of energy, warding off the helicopter from hovering over us and mapping our positions.

I glanced over my shoulder one last time to see Wanda ducking behind the pick-up truck, bullets ricocheting off its side.

And then, in the distance, someone crying out. Pietro had already begun his attack.

I turned back to face the way I was going. I stopped at the far end of the shipping container, pressing my back to the metal. I was about to peer around, check if the coast was clear, when I heard crunching footsteps — several of them.

Three agents rounded the corner. Dressed in black, with visors and helmets, each armed with an AK-12 — I didn't know how I knew that — they looked like some sort of black-ops team. Their vests were laden with extra ammunition and at least three different types of grenades. They wore no crests or badges indicating whose side they were on; not mine, at the very least.

They paused for a moment, crouching down and scanning the area; the spot I was in not two seconds ago. They spotted Wanda thirty feet away. They already knew Pietro was on the other end of the bridge. So where was the third?

They never thought to look up.

I had flattened myself against the top of the shipping container, looking down. The third agent was
still behind the corner, outside the line of sight of the first two. It was the third agent whose shoulders I landed on.

He only managed to let out a brief cry before I knocked him unconscious.

The first two agents jumped, caught off guard. The second one didn't even get a chance to turn around before I grabbed him from behind. I kicked him behind the knee and his leg gave out—using gravity as an aid, I slammed his head into the container, and he dropped.

By that time, the first agent, now last, had turned around. He raised his weapon. I was faster.

I lunged forward, slipping around the weapon, and slammed my fist directly into his face. I felt plastic and cartilage break beneath my touch. The agent's head snapped back with a grunt, and he stumbled, falling backwards.

I had just bent down, about to grab the weapon, when I felt something press against my skull.

"Don't move," The man ordered, and it took me a moment to realize he was speaking in Russian. I could feel the click of the weapon as he readied it. "Stand down, Soldatka. Don't make this harder than it has to be."

Idiot! I wanted to kick myself. I should've seen him coming. I went very still, heart skipping a beat. He was behind me. I couldn't see any part of him. I couldn't retaliate without getting myself shot.

I glanced down, breathing hard. Think of something. Think of something.

"Hands up," The agent ordered, jamming the muzzle against my head to show he meant it.

I took a deep breath, before obeying. "If you insist."

As I raised both hands, a pin fell from my fist, clinking to the ground. I felt the agent pause behind me, unsure of what he saw, before I opened three of my fingers, and revealed the armed grenade I had pulled off of the fallen agent beneath me.

"You shoot me," I said, risking a tiny glance over my shoulder. I looked up the barrel of the rifle, saw the whites of the man's eyes behind it. "I drop this. We both die."

He cursed in Russian. When he backed off, I would've smiled, had I any real reason to.

As soon as I felt the barrel leaved my head, I twisted on my heel. Raised my leg, swept it beneath the feet of the agent. I caught him just as he stepped back, his balance off, and sent him on his back. Without wasting a breath, I shot to a stand, bringing myself over him, grenade still in hand.

His last look was one of terror before I raised the grenade beside my head, so he could see it. Then I threw it aside.

The grenade went off in a plume of fire over the side of the bridge.

I left another unconscious agent behind as I finally rounded the container, and continued up the side of the bridge.

There was a clearing here, beyond the fallen containers. Mostly cars and open road, debris whipped up in a whirlwind created by the chopper's blades. At least it sucked away the blinding smoke. To the far right, I could see Pietro's flickering slipstream as he dealt with his own agents.

Then there was the Winter Soldier. He had taken cover behind a sedan, avoiding Wanda's
debilitating attacks. He hadn't seen me yet.

Nor had the agent that was crouched behind the front of a delivery truck. Before the Winter Soldier could spot me, I slid over the hood of the truck and dropped down on the agent. Caught him by the head with my hand, brought my other elbow down on his neck. Landed on one knee. His AK-12 clattered to the ground.

Then I heard a gunshot. A scream.

I whipped around, just in time to see Wanda fall, clutching her shoulder. For to my left, the Winter Soldier, lowering his weapon. The helicopter loomed in closer.

A flash of silver. Pietro was at her side in an instant, crouching over her in protection.

I saw someone in the hull of the aircraft - a man readying himself behind a machine gun. Without thinking, I grabbed the fallen assault rifle next to me, dropped to a kneeling position, and brought the weapon to bear, stock against my shoulder, hand under the barrel shroud. A flick of my wrist, bolt sliding back, cleared the barrel, load. Peering through scope, took aim. Trigger.

It was just a set of instructions, order of steps to follow in my head. I still remembered, with absolute clarity, what happened the last time I held a gun.

This was different.

I didn't aim for the head. It was all so fast it was hard to say what exactly I hit at all. All I saw was the spark of the bullet's impact, and the body flying back. Was he hit? Was he dead? Didn't matter.

The helicopter veered back again, the machine gun unmanned and hanging at a loose angle. I lowered the rifle, brought my attention back to the bridge before me.

Pietro was trying to help Wanda up. I could see the pain in her face, even from here. Her hand, pressed against her shoulder, was covered in blood.

Two more agents, on Pietro's side, were coming on them. They passed a taxi on fire. Another split-second decision. I raised the rifle, fired into the car.

The bullet hit the gas tank. Gas spilled.

The car exploded, and the two agents were sent flying.

The Winter Soldier was less than fifty feet away. Didn't even look at the exploding taxi, his fallen men. Just kept walking, as if this were some daytime stroll, not a battle to the death.

He loaded his rifle, brought it up.

I aimed for the Winter Soldier. My finger went around the trigger. He was right there. It was a clear shot.

But I couldn't take it. My muscles froze. My mind scrambled in a panic, images flashed in front of my eyes.

The snow. The train. The Extremis soldier on top of me, the pistol wrestled between us. My hand on the trigger. The flash, the bang, the blood.

I couldn't do it. A wave of nausea rolled over me, pushing my under. I gasped, lost my balance, almost dropped the AK-12. A belated fire, the bullet missing the Winter Soldier by a mile. He didn't
even notice. Or maybe he did, and didn't see me as enough of a threat to acknowledge.

I watched, horrified, as Pietro went down.

He cried out, writhing as what looked like some sort of bolt hit him in the leg. He was unconscious by the time he hit the ground.

Wanda screamed, agony and rage. She raised her good arm. A red supernova exploded from her palm. The pick-up truck they'd been hiding behind launched into the air, straight for the Winter Soldier.

He simply turned out of the way.

The truck flew by harmlessly. The Winter Soldier didn't even look to see where it went. He stopped, raised the rifle again, with one hand, ready to finish off Wanda. She stood there, red eyes alight, staring him down. She would not go down on her knees.

His back, still turned to avoid the truck, was to me.

That was the closest he ever came to making a mistake.

He never saw me coming. As soon as Wanda lifted the truck, I dropped the weapon and ran. Before the Winter Soldier could fire off that last shot, I lunged.

I came in from above, using an overturned cop car as a launchpad. I jumped off the bumper and swept my leg — my heel connected with the barrel just as he pulled the trigger. It swung like an arc. The bullet went wide. I hit hard enough to send the weapon out of his grip. It spun in the air, before falling somewhere behind the mess of containers and debris.

I hadn't even landed before following the kick up with a fist to the face, twisting in midair to land the blow.

It was like hitting a brick wall. I didn't even feel the pain of contact — to even consider the greatest mistake I ever made.

It was already too late.

The Winter Soldier didn't even flinch at my blow. My feet touched the ground. At the same time, he caught my offending fist. His human arm had a punishing grip. It was preamble to the metal one that found my throat and slammed me into the ground.

He threw me so hard that the tarmac cracked beneath me. My head hit so hard, it felt like an explosion inside my head. All I could see were white and red stars, stabbing my eyes like daggers.

By the time I registered the pain, I realized I couldn't breathe.

It felt like ages, but was really only a split second. His metal hand was still around my throat. My hand flew to it instinctively, trying to pry off his grip. But I should've known - it was impossible. My left hand was still caught, pinned to the ground beside my head.

My vision cleared. I wasn't ready for the sight less than two feet from my face.

The Winter Soldier, looming over me. The first thing I registered were his eyes; covered in black grease contrasted a cold blue gaze. They bored into mine, utterly emotionless. The bottom half of his face was hidden beneath a mask.
He said something to me, then. But my pounding heart, my thoughts were screaming so loud I couldn't hear a thing.

Gasping, I pounded against his chest, to no effect. My legs kicked uselessly. The world was starting to feel light - an effect of oxygen deprivation.

I was dying.

Somewhere overhead, a shadow passed over us, turning bright white to black for a moment. I vaguely acknowledged the chopper flying past.

Incredibly, the last thoughts I had were Pietro's words, echoing in my head: *You don't fight the Winter Soldier. He's unstoppable.*

I never made it easy on myself, did I? I always had to learn things the hard way.

I clawed down the straps of his jacket. My fingers caught on something round, metal.

I couldn't see it. My vision had faded out again. But I didn't need it to recognize the shape of a grenade.

The Winter Soldier understood what I was thinking right before I did it. He jerked back, letting go my left hand to grab my right.

But his movement only pulled the pin in my hand out of the grenade. I flinched, my now-free hand flying up to cover my face.

The grenade went off. It wasn't the type I was hoping for.

The flash-bang went off as expected. With a bright blast and a sudden explosion of smoke.

The Winter Soldier recoiled, releasing me completely. Blinded for a moment, he stumbled back, one hand over his eyes. I was left gasping and coughing on the ground, oxygen assaulting my deprived throat. I rolled over to my side, blinking up into the sky. Having closed my eyes at the right moment, I could now see again.

The Winter Soldier shook his head, already recovering from the grenade's effects. Without looking, he reached down with his metal arm and wrapped his fist around the grenade still attached to him, and ripped it off.

My ears still rang with white noise from the grenade. On my hands and knees, I looked up, past the Winter Soldier, to where I last saw Wanda and Pietro.

Wanda was still standing — just barely. With one hand she warded off the rest of the ground agents, who had surrounded her and Pietro, who was still on the ground. A sheen of sweat covered her face, exhaustion and pain marring her features. It was all she could do to fend off bullets, knock back the agents. Her energy blasts were weakening, only managing small kinetic blows, instead of the usual destructive force she managed.

She was losing.

I rose to my feet, wiping at my face. The Winter Soldier stood between me and them. He had just thrown away the remnants of the grenade, rendering it to a ball of scrap metal in his grip.

My chances weren't high. But I ran for Wanda anyways.
The Winter Soldier turned, struck out his arm. Probably to clothesline me, but I anticipated it. I slowed, ducked my head back before he could grab my throat.

But his fist closed around the front of my shirt. It jerked me back — I twisted, spun on my heel, ducked under his arm. Came back up and brought my elbow down on the arm that had me — flesh, which bent under my blow, bringing me closer to bring that same elbow to the Winter Soldier's head.

He let go, but not before slinging me around, back where I came. The Winter Soldier remained between me and where I wanted to go. I stumbled, spun around so my back didn't face him any longer than it had to. I knew if it did, then I'd be dead.

I saw the knife at the last second.

I gasped, skipped backwards at the last second, throwing my arms out. The combat knife, almost a foot long, flew past — my shirt ripped as the very tip of the blade caught against the fabric. The Winter Soldier swung at me again, flipping the blade into a reverse grip so its serrated edge was facing me again.

Its blade sang as it sliced air. The Winter Soldier was unrelenting, just kept coming at me as I continued to back up. The second swipe missed; Two, three, four.

He was fast, so fast. I barely had time to see it before I ducked, dodged, scrambled out of the way. My breathing was ragged, still suffering after being choked. I could barely keep up.

The knife slipped past my hand. A second later I felt a burning down my arm — he had cut me. I had no idea how bad it was. There was no time to take stock of my injuries — of which there were undoubtedly many. I didn't have time to register the pain, just surge past it.

The Winter Soldier moved like a machine. So smooth, so quick, it was like he was preprogrammed, not a person making split-second decisions, but a computer operating at a speed beyond human capability. I was just fast enough to avoid getting stabbed. I didn't have the spare thought to even think of attacking; I was entirely on the defensive now, just trying to stay alive.

But whenever the Winter Soldier missed a blow with his knife, he followed up with a metal fist. I took a blow to the side and I couldn't breathe again, but I refused to collapse. Just keep moving. Just keep backing up.

I knew his game. I knew what he was trying to do. Just pushing me further and further away from Wanda and Pietro, distract me so I couldn't help them.

Well, it was working. Knowing it didn't help.

Then my legs hit a car behind me. I saw the flash of the blade as it came down.

I brought up my arm just before the knife buried itself in my shoulder.

The Winter Soldier was even stronger than I expected. I nearly collapsed under the full weight of the blow. My knees buckled. The knife grazed my neck.

It was instinctual, to hold this form, to keep pushing back. But I could already tell that the Winter Soldier would overpower me, so instead I let gravity do the work.

My knees turned to jelly. I bent my head and threw myself forward, under and around the Winter Soldier, using his falling momentum to push past him.
The blade slammed into the hood of the car behind me. I almost turned to Wanda, but didn’t at the last moment. No, the Winter Soldier still had his knife, and I couldn’t turn my back on him. As soon as I did, that knife would end up in my spine.

I backed up just in time for the Winter Soldier to pivot — knife already removed from the car, back on me again. But I was ready for it this time. I just hoped I was as fast as him. No, I had to be faster.

I was far enough away that he had to extend his arm, which is what I wanted. I caught his wrist with both of my hands — thankfully, he wielded the knife with his human arm — halting his momentum, and twisted down with all the strength I could muster. I wasn’t strong enough to best him, but I could at least get rid of that damn knife.

I watched, in a moment of victory, as he let go of the knife.

As it fell, I kicked it in mid-air, sent it skittering away.

The Winter Soldier was bothered enough to grunt. So far, he had been entirely silent, entirely effortless in his attack. I had just kicked the knife when he retaliated with a blow to my side — the same place he struck earlier.

I let out a cry; this time, I felt something, bones cracking like lightning in my chest. The pain bloomed in my head, but I forced it back; no, don’t get distracted. Keep up or you’ll die.

The blow was enough to send me back; I let go of the Winter Soldier, gasping. He kept coming at me; nothing seemed to slow him down.

I backed up a few steps, before getting wind back and deciding to change the tides a little. Stop backing up, start going forward. My back was to Wanda and Pietro, but what else could I do now but cross the Winter Soldier?

I didn’t know what else to do. I threw a fist at him. He slapped my hand away, followed up with a swing to my face. I raised my forearm to block the metal fist — absorbing blows from his powerful cyborg limb wasn’t the best idea, but in the heat of the moment I couldn’t think of something better.

And it went on like that. Me trying to deliver blows, failing, only put on the defensive again trying not to get hit, and failing at that, too. I took a heel to the leg, fist to the hip, a knee to the abdomen; I managed to strike him all of two times; two ineffective blows to the chest and arm. It was like he didn’t feel it at all.

He deflected my blows with quick, efficient ease. It didn’t matter what I did, it was like he expected it. I briefly wondered, in a moment of desperate frustration, if the Winter Soldier could actually read my mind.

It wasn’t like I had the chance to ask.

I almost wished I had a weapon, but I already knew how bad an idea that would be. It would only take a second for the Winter Soldier to use it against me.

I was way out of my league and I knew it. I knew it as soon as he had thrown me to the ground. But I couldn’t conceive the thought of surrendering. Not after everything I fought for. Not after escaping those memories, not after what I’d been through with the twins. We’d gotten so far. How could I stop now?

He was just playing with me. I wasn’t sure of it, but far back in my mind I was aware of how unchallenged the Winter Soldier seemed to be. Somehow, I had the feeling he could just end it right
now, but for some unknown reason, didn't.

One wayward fist and he grabbed my arm, sent me careening over the front of a van. I landed head over heels, before crashing to the ground in a daze.

I tried to pick myself up, but my body was moving slower, resisting. My head swam. I tasted blood in my mouth. There wasn't a single part of my body that didn't hurt.

I could see him, just out of the corner of my eye. A black shadow, getting closer and closer. Heavy bootsteps. I thought of getting up, getting away, but I knew I didn't have the energy, the speed left.

I had just managed to rise on my elbows when a cold hand fell on top of my head. I grimaced as metal fingers gripped my hair, hauled me up, roll my head back so I was looking at him again.

The Winter Soldier leaned over me. The only sign of exertion was the slight rise and fall of his shoulders. Did he ever run out of breath? I was almost dead weight. How could he lift so much with one arm?

Those same expressionless eyes. He didn't even seem annoyed, much less angry that I was putting up such a fight — so unlike those Extremis soldiers, unlike Brandt, who were all rage, all heat, all the time.

They never shut up. The Winter Soldier, however, didn't speak at all.

He was only one man. But he was more terrifying than the entire Komitet put together.

Something came over me then. A strange, foggy notion in my head. The Winter Soldier had me at his mercy. He never hesitated a single blow. Why wasn't I dead yet?

Then, slowly, I reached up. One lone, shaky hand, towards his face. The Winter Soldier jerked his head back, but I was just a little bit faster. My nails caught on the edge of his mask, and it pulled away. It dropped to the ground, my hand following, grip not strong enough to hold it.

I stared.

A face. A whole face. Blue eyes completed by a square jaw, a stern mouth. For a moment, the briefest expression crossed the Winter Soldier's face — lips parted, eyes widening just a fraction.

Surprise.

And that's when I realized: I knew him.

He trained me.

In that moment, I knew I had already lost.

He continued to stare at me; the surprise slipped away, erased in the next moment by an invisible hand. Like he'd already forgotten. As if his face shouldn't be a concern for me.

I didn't know what it meant. I couldn't look away. My heart was racing, a rabbit trying to escape from an eagle's penetrating sight. I didn't know what he would do next.

I didn't have time to wait.

Beneath me, my other hand scanned the ground. It brushed against something flat, round, metal. My fingers slipped through wide holes. My grip tightened.
Still holding the Winter Soldier's gaze, I swung my arm around. The hubcap struck him.

It glanced off his chin. The Winter Soldier recoiled, caught off guard, letting me go.

I wrenched myself away, scrambled to my feet, facing the Winter Soldier again. To my right was the edge of the bridge, the banister all that was left between us and water. To my left, the rest of the bridge, Wanda and —

"Pietro!"

The scream ripped through the air. I spun around, heart leaping into my throat at what I saw.

Pietro's unconscious body, being lifted into the helicopter.

Wanda, being wrestled to the ground, before an agent slammed the butt of his rifle against her temple.

Her cries ended abruptly and she crumpled.

"Wanda!" I called, but my voice was weak, hoarse. I realized I hadn't said a word this entire time; too focused on fighting, I never thought of keeping up communication with the twins. If I had, maybe I would've known sooner how much trouble they were in.

And now it was too late.

They were already lifting Wanda into the chopper as I started to run.

No no no no no no no

I didn't even make it two steps before a hand grabbed my arm. My second cry was cut short as I was yanked back.

I turned my head, just in time to see the metal fist coming towards my face.

I didn't feel it hit. I did, however, feel the ground leave my feet. The banister at my back. The air as I flipped over.


Fists closed. Fingers clenched around metal. I caught myself on a piece of rebar. My grip was sure as my body continued to fall.

I cried out weakly as my shoulder took the weight of the fall, pulled between my arm and the rest of me as I swung precariously from loose rebar, sticking out from the damaged bridge.

I looked down. Black waters churned thirty feet below. I vaguely remembered Plan B.

My grip was slipping. My muscles were tired, palm covered in sweat. I didn't have the strength to lift up my other arm, to pull myself up.

I looked up. Blood in my eyes. I didn't know what to think, when I saw the Winter Soldier leaning over the side. His eyes were on me. Maybe he'd come to see the job finished.

I thought he would pull out a weapon. Put a bullet between my eyes. At least make it quick. I probably wouldn't even feel it.
Instead, he reached out.

I blinked, uncomprehending.

Then my hand slipped from the rebar.

I didn't even scream as I plunged into the Thames.

The last thing I saw was the Winter Soldier still reaching for me. One metal palm, fingers outstretched.

The world turned black.

✮✮✮

"Describe to me what you just saw,"

_The Crucible._

It was earlier this time. Not many weeks into my stay here, after I'd...changed. Not that I could tell, from the scene around me. A dark room. Desks all around me. A single projector light, showing something on the opposite wall. The place looked like a classroom from the 70's... which, admittedly, was a familiar notion thanks to Douglass, but it felt much older here. At least Douglass had windows.

The glare of the projector was hard against my eyes. I couldn't quite see the source of the voice. It was rough, male, grim. I recognized it. But in that moment, reliving this memory, I couldn't put a face to it.

"A car crash." I replied. I was strapped in that wooden chair again; this wasn't the first time I'd been in this room. A classroom, indeed, where I was taught less physical material. Words, languages, smaller, subtler skills. Today, I was shown pictures, photographs.

This photo in particular, which I had been given about sixty seconds to look at (with no previous instruction), and it was only now I was getting any clue as to what it was about. This was a new lesson; I was not told what the purpose of it was.

"How many people were there?"

"Four."

"And how many were men?"

"Three. One was a woman."

"And what color was the woman's hair?"

"Blonde." I said, pausing a second. Was this important somehow? What did it matter what color hair she had?

"How many cars were there, and what colors were they?"
"Three. Red, yellow and…" I couldn't remember for a second, closing my eyes. "Green. The last one was green."

"And what were their license plates?"

"The license plates?"

"Yes. Their numbers. What were they? I want to know all of them."

"I…" My memory of the image was a blur. The license plates were practically nonexistent, just a white haze and some vague dashes. I didn't remember even looking at them for that long. Even if I could recall them, why? Who needed to memorize three license plate numbers at once? "I-I don't…"

Closing my eyes didn't help, so I opened them, focused on the man sitting in one corner of the room. I didn't know his codename then, just knew his job, and that he terrified me. The Baron only referred to him as Солдат. Over six feet tall, he stood imposing with stringy dark hair and a metal arm. A red star glimmering darkly in the dim light. The man was cleaning his rifle, seeming to not even be paying attention. How did he know what the picture looked like from that angle? When I couldn't come up with an answer right away, he called, "Try again. Tell me what province they were labeled. Country."

As if I could tell at first glance. Even if I had looked, my poor reading ability would've only slowed me down further. I could only shrug helplessly, my wrists aching from the straps. Those scientists needn't have bothered strapping me in; I wasn't going to try and escape while in the presence of a cold-blooded killer armed with the biggest weapon I'd ever seen in my life.

When I couldn't come up with an answer, the Солдат finally picked up his head, scowling. His gaze sent a chill down my back, and I averted my eyes. I whispered, "I don't remember."

"Wrong answer." he said. "The license plate numbers were Two-Four-Alpha-James-Seven-Niner, Hotel-Eight-Kilo-Bravo-One, and Victor-Zero-Six-Three-November-Lima. They were all American plates, two from Pennsylvania, one from Michigan. And you forgot to count the child in the backseat of the red car. You would know this, if you paid attention. Now, try again."

He flicked his hand, and whoever manned the projector filtered in a new image. Blinking rapidly to the new light, it took me a second to take in the photograph, then try to pick out things that I thought would be important to the Солдат. This image was now of a cafe, the interior with the camera facing the window, a bright street outside. I just barely managed to register the signage written in French before the projector just off again.

It was gone faster than I anticipated. "Wait, I wasn't done —"

"You don't get second chances," the Солдат cut me off, his tone as flat and dead as his title implied. Just hearing it made me shrink in my chair. His metal arm gleamed in the projector's light, and I wondered if he was even human at all. "Now tell me. How many people were in the room?"

"S-seven."

"How many exits could you see?"

"One. The front door. A... a window was open."

"Which window?"

"The one on the far left, by the lady with the blue shirt."
"Good. And what kind of hat was the man next to her wearing?"

"His hat? Who cares about his hat?" The words were out of my mouth before I could stop them, and I immediately clamped my mouth shut when I realized what I said. No, that was bad, shouldn't have said that, shouldn't have said that—

"Who cares?" The Soldat repeated. I expected him to snap, but he just echoed my words, in an almost curious manner. There wasn't really much of an expression on his face, if there was ever one besides perpetual grimness, but it seemed different now. I couldn't put my finger on it, although I was too scared to really think much on that particular detail anyways.

"Who cares?" he continued. "You care. Because that is your job."

"My job?" I said incredulously. This was the first I'd heard of it. I mean, I knew this torture, this training, if you could call it that, was for something. But a job? "What job? I don't work for anyone."

"Wrong." The Soldat said, his shadowed eyes dead set on mine. If looks could kill… "You work for the good of the Soviet people. You are a Soldatka, loyal to the Chairman, and will serve him to the best of your abilities. This role was chosen for you, and you will not fail."

"N-no," I said, my voice shaking. None of it seemed real. The Winter Soldier sounded like a record, repeating words, propaganda. I wasn't going to take it. I told him, in a slightly stronger tone, "I'm not a soldier. I don't know who you people are, but I don't belong to anyone —"

"She's resisting again," said a voice behind me. I tried to look over my shoulder to see who it was, but they were just out of my range. I could tell it was male, and he sounded somewhat concerned. "I thought we fixed this already. I'll alert the Baron, make sure she's wiped again, maybe more reconditioning —"

"No." The Soldat stood up. I flinched, and as he approached, I realized I was trembling. "She does not need reconditioning, she needs motivation. Look again." He gestured to the screen again. Another image appeared. "Analyze this picture, but now with the knowledge that someone in this room is going to kill you."

"What?" I yelped, my eyes scanning the image frantically. "Which one?"

"That's for you to figure out." The image disappeared. "Tell me what you saw, and identify the hostile agent."

The memory slipped away before I could grasp the moment. I found myself standing in another room. A training room — like the one with Brandt, only this time, I was facing the Winter Soldier again.

Except this time, he wasn't trying to kill me.

We were sparring, like Brandt and I were sparring, but this time I could tell something was different. I felt stronger. I had grown into my muscles, and my reflexes were faster.

Just fast enough to learn from the Winter Soldier.

Unlike Brandt, he wielded a knife — the same one he'd use on my again months later, on Tower Bridge. Not that either of us would know it at the time. What mattered was that it was real, and that I had already taken a few blows from it.

This was later. So much later. I wasn't afraid of the Winter Soldier anymore; or, at least, I'd gotten
used to his presence, knew better than to talk back. I had learned his codename from overhearing the awed Extremis agents, who would drop to silence whenever he passed by.

Those early lessons in the classroom were long gone. I had been successfully assimilated into the Crucible. I had proven to them I wasn't weak.

So far.

My left arm was primarily for defense, blocking — it was cut up, a hash of thin red slices through the skin where I'd stopped the blade. They weren't deep cuts. They hurt, but I was taught not to feel it. At this point, it was almost second nature. Even as the blood dripped to the floor, I continued on as though I weren't injured at all.

Swipe, stab, block. It took me a moment to realize that I, too, was holding a knife. The Winter Soldier blocked it with his metal arm. It didn't bleed like mine did.

His blows were completely real, however. I could feel bruises on my sides, my arms, my legs. Those would heal, as they always did. The cuts from the knife would turn into scars. I always recovered quickly. I didn't have a choice.

He came for my head. I ducked under his arm. He swept my foot out, but I caught my fall, landed on my hands in a push-up, rolled over before the Winter Soldier could embed the knife in my back. I threw my own weapon at him. He backed off long enough for me to get back to my feet.

"Enough," he said to me in Russian, calling for the spar to end. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw dark figures in the shadows. We were being watched. Observed. By who? I couldn't remember.

"That was impressive," someone said from the darkness.

More murmurs came up. But it was the Winter Soldier who gave me a short nod as he passed me, leaving. "You could be better."

That was the only compliment he ever gave me.

Other quick memories flashed. Other sparring matches, then weapons training. The Winter Soldier forcing me to hold a knife, a pistol, a rifle correctly. How to measure breathing. How to shoot between pulses.

I never wanted to learn these things. But he didn't ask. He had his orders, and I had mine.

The Winter Soldier wasn't always there. I never knew where he went, just that most of the time, Brandt taught me, in her usual cruel, sadistic fashion. Her laughter, her jeers echoed in my ears. But I knew they weren't training me to be an Extremis soldier. No, I was going to be something different.

What that was, I still didn't know. But I knew better than to ask.

Whenever the Winter Soldier did appear, it always got harder. He wasn't cruel like Brandt, he didn't seem to enjoy punishing me; he didn't seem to enjoy anything, really. I'd never seen a reaction out of him, not even when I failed (which was more often than not, but had been improving in later months). He was simply methodical, almost business-like in how to handle things. No more effort than needed, function as smoothly as possible. No fanciness, no elaboration, no indulgent. Just get it done.

It took practice, to think and act like that. It was easier to fall into that mindset, when I didn't remember who I was.
I was just another task for the Winter Soldier. I doubt teaching was in his repertoire of abilities. But he was the only one of his kind; the ones who made him were long dead.

So that was it with him. Sparring, training, even lessons outside. I vaguely recalled trees, snow, following his dark form, tracking something in the wilderness.

Why hadn't I run then? If the Crucible was stupid enough to let me outside, why hadn't I run when I had the chance?

I didn't know. They were little more than snapshots, vignettes of other memories I still couldn't reach.

Then I fell back into myself, into something familiar.

Savin's face, in front of me. That crooked, awful grin.

"You don't know when to quit, do you?" Savin asked, tilting his head as I started to squirm. His grip tightened, grew hotter. I watched as the veins down his arm began to glow. "They told me you were quiet, but I didn't realize they meant you were mute. Can you talk at all?"

*Not this. Not this again.*

My throat was tight, and not because he was starting to choke me. My tongue was dry in my mouth.

The words were rough, barely more than a whisper. "Yes."

It hurt coming out, like ripping my heart out of my throat. I hadn't spoken in so long, I didn't even recognize my own voice, realize that I'd spoken, until after I saw the expression on Savin's face.

He grinned viciously. "Well, look at that. I bet that mouth of yours could do more interesting things besides talking."

I clenched my jaw, and despite myself, tried to shake him off. But the effort was only half-hearted, stunted by some internal force that suffocated insurrection.

Savin's grip clenched tighter, and I let out a whimper as he started to burn me. "What's wrong, sweetheart, you don't like me? The Crucible made you to serve. So, what happened to that obedience they promised us?"

I jerked in his grip. "Not... yours."

"Like hell you aren't," Savin snarled, his voice lowering as a few agents passed behind him. He drew in closer, so our faces were inches away. I could smell his breath — sulfur and brimstone. There was a faint red glow in his eyes as they bored into mine. "If the Baron didn't want me playing with his toys, he shouldn't have picked one with such a pretty face."

He drew in closer, and I was frozen in fear. It was forbidden for me to attack a superior without permission, when it wasn't a part of training. Savin knew this, and he seemed to have no problem taking advantage of it.

I thought it would end there, like it did last time. But it didn't. I seized against the wall, trying to wriggle away from him. Try to disobey and survive. But I couldn't. I couldn't. I couldn't.

*No no no no no*

Savin's face was inches from mine.
"Enough, Savin."

Savin jumped back, caught off guard. I dropped, slumping against the wall, breathless as Savin spun to face the man who interrupted his moment.

The Winter Soldier.

He stood there, in the center of the hall, watching Savin with only the turn of his head. Where he had come from, I had no idea. Judging from how well he was armed, he was heading out on a mission — or had just come back from one. He regarded Savin with a cool look.

"What, is there a problem?" Savin asked with irreverence, but I could hear the slight tremble in his voice. He was afraid of the Winter Soldier, and could only hide it behind bravado. He crossed his arms and jerked his chin up. "I'm not against orders. This isn't your business, so go bother someone else."

The Winter Soldier said nothing. His face was stone. But his glare said everything.

Savin faltered slightly, glanced to the side. It became clear that the Winter Soldier was not moving any time soon. In an effort to save face, Savin just huffed and said, "Well, I got better shit to do anyways."

And with that, he stalked off, head held high. I could only watch, back still pressed against the wall. The Winter Soldier watched him go, before turning in the opposite direction.

A flick of his head was all the indication he gave for me to follow.

I obeyed, pulling myself out of the cold shadows, drawing up in the Winter Soldier's footsteps. I knew I was in trouble, that this was bad, but I said nothing; I had no reason to speak when no one was directly asking me a question.

The Winter Soldier said nothing. He didn't even look behind him to make sure I was following. Just continued to walk silently through the cement halls, up two floors and past several superior officers who didn't so much as give us a second look.

It wasn't until we were through another hallway - heading to what I remembered as an exit - alone again, with only our footsteps as an audience, when the Winter Soldier spoke again.

"What happened back there was unacceptable," He said, his voice slightly harder than usual. "What excuse do you have?"

"No excuse, sir," my voice wasn't much more than a whisper.

The Winter Soldier continued walking. "What will you do if that happens again?"

My mind went scattering, trying to find an answer. I couldn't. Embarrassed and angry with myself, I remained silent.

Perhaps intuiting this, the Winter Soldier said, "You fight back."

The answer was so out of left-field that I actually blurted, "What?"

It was enough to get the Winter Soldier to stop — so fast I almost ran into him. He pivoted on his heel to face me, those dead eyes locked on mine. He was several inches taller than me, and it took all my will not to cower back.
He pressed a finger (flesh) into my collarbone. "You fight back. Don't make me repeat myself."

I could only stare at him helplessly. "But.... I can't. I can't hurt him. It's against orders. I have to do what he says."

"It's *my* orders, do you understand?" He snapped, making me flinch. "Savin is superior to you. I'm superior to him, so it's *me* you listen to. Fight back. If Savin, or anyone else, ever approaches you that way again, you have my explicit command to defend yourself."

"But...why?" I had to keep my jaw from hanging. This was dangerously close to treason. I couldn't believe it was the Winter Soldier, of all people, telling me this.

The Winter Soldier blinked, appearing to translate what I just said. "Because you are an agent of the Chairman, not a plaything to his Vulkan. Do I make myself clear?"

And just like that, thoughts of treason were gone. Oh, of course. I was an agent of the Chairman. I wouldn't half as useful if I had been compromised by the Vulkan, would I?

"Yes, sir," I said, my gaze casting to the floor as I nodded, all confusion banished.

"Good." The Winter Soldier withdrew with another curt nod. Having no other orders, I continued to follow him. Ahead of us, the door to the outside gleamed closer. It looked so normal, metal with chipped green paint. It could've led anywhere.

I turned my head ever so slightly as the Winter Soldier punched in the keycode to unlock the door. There was a camera in the upper right corner, red light blinking. The way it was angled, it wouldn't have caught our recent conversation.

The door opened. Bitter white wind blew in, casting snowflakes down the hall. Before me, the wintry expanse of the Black Diamond mountains spread out. An army of thin gray columns awaited in the blizzard, trees whipped bare of any life.

The Winter Soldier paused before stepping out. "And if something *does* happen, you will report it to me. Immediately."

"Yes, sir," I nodded once more. As he stepped out into the drift, I risked asking, "W-why? What will you do?"

As I followed him out the door, I already expected his answer; his business wasn't mine to know. That the Chairman would handle it. Some higher-up to Savin and the Winter Soldier, who handled conduct problems... if that was even a *thing* in the Crucible.

For once, I was surprised I was wrong.

The Winter Soldier glanced at me over his shoulder. Something flickered in his eyes. "I make sure it never happens again."
**S.H.I.E.L.D. DOSSIER**

**??**

**TITLE:** Assassin

**HANDLE:** The Winter Soldier

**STATUS:** Active, Hostile [CONTESTED]

**THREAT LEVEL:** 12 [WARNING: DO NOT ENGAGE]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOB:</th>
<th>SEX:</th>
<th>KILLS:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[???]</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>47 [ATTRIBUTED]</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**AGE:** [???]

**HAIR/EYE COLOR:** Brown. [???]

**NATIONALITY:** Russian [CONTESTED]

**HEIGHT/WEIGHT:** 6.0ft., 200lbs [CONTESTED]

**AFFILIATED WITH:**

**YEARS ACTIVE:** 1962 - Present [???]

**ABILITIES:**

- Superhuman Strength, Speed,
- Reflexes
- Bionic Arm [Contested]
- Immortality [Contested]
- Healing Factor [?]
- Teleportation [Contested]
  [???]

**SKILLS:**

- Master Marksman
- Master Martial-Artist
- Weapons Expert
- Complete Anonymity [?]
- Fluent in Russian [Contested]
  [???]

**NOTES:**

- LAST SUSPECTED SIGHTING: Romania, 2/12/2008
- Questioned Existence: Not officially recognized in any agency [?]
- Photo evidence inconclusive
- Treat all reports with skepticism

Graphic by me :)
Chapter End Notes

And thus we end here, with Amelia continuing the long-held proud tradition of “Super Soldiers Falling from High Places”; first started by Bucky after being thrown from the train in CATFA; to be followed up later by Steve after he drops from the helicarrier in CAWS (not counting the numerous times he’s fallen in the Avengers movies, which weren’t quite as devastating, but still).

It’s a super soldier’s kryptonite, apparently.

This is honestly the only way a fight with the Winter Soldier is going to turn out for Mia. God, that was fun to write.

I listened to the track ‘The Winter Soldier’ from CAWS for most of the bridge scene. Not that it’s relevant. But you know ;)

This may or may not be a hint of what's to come...
Chapter Twenty-Eight

Chapter Notes

A/N: Ha, I just saw the third Spider-Man: Homecoming trailer, and they proved my theory in this fic correct! Peter will have FRIDAY/another AI equipped in his suit :)

Idk just felt like sharing that

Someone sent me a very nice ask on my tumblr about this fic and I just wanted to say thank you :) i love answering those types of questions (any questions really).

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty-Eight

"...the hell did she come from? Why is she soaking wet?"

"I have no idea! She just appeared, out of nowhere. She must have survived the attack on the bridge. I had to let her in."

They spoke in hushed whispers, for fear of being heard by the girl in the other room. It had only been a few hours since the strange American girl had shown up on her doorstep, so to speak. Julia had no idea how she found the apartment, much less got inside, but there she was, dripping wet, blood covering half her face, and muttering incoherently.

"Well, you can't hide her here!" Frank said. He looked well, after a week of rest. His old bruises were finally starting to fade, and he'd gotten a new pair of glasses to repair the ones that had cracked. Julia wished she felt as well as he looked.

It had been over a week since Julia had last seen Rebel in Sokovia. Back then, the teenager had appeared tall, confident, almost five years older than she actually was — a little beat-up but still somehow jovial after their victory in freeing the city of Novi Grad.

Now? A trembling, inconsolable wreck. Julia could see her youth now, in the tears and the terror. She was bleeding from her head, her nose, at least a dozen other places along her body. There were thick black bruises around her throat, and her voice was little more than a hoarse whisper. Her yellow coat was stained in what Julia hoped was just her own blood — but she knew there were probably others.

"What the bloody hell else am I supposed to do? We can't very well go to the police; the whole city is on high alert. They'll think she's a terrorist — not to mention the fact that she's utterly goddamn terrified of anything that moves!"

"But it's too dangerous. She's dangerous, Julia! Didn't you see the news footage? It was just like Sokovia, only a thousand times worse!"
"I remember Sokovia! I remember her protecting us, saving lives! I didn't see anything different now. We were just attacked, Frank!" Julia had no idea what happened to Rebel, couldn't believe the girl was still standing. All she knew was that Rebel had now taken refuge in the kitchen, huddled in one corner with a knife procured from one the drawers.

Whatever had attacked her, Rebel was terrified of it coming back.

"We need to take her to a hospital," Frank said, after taking a deep breath to calm himself. He had been the first- and only-person Julia had called about this; she trusted no one else.

The arguing was a little inconvenient, though. "We can't."

"Julia! Did you even see that cut on her forehead?" Frank gestured towards the kitchen doorway — closed, since Rebel was too panicked to have it any other way. At least she was contained. "That alone is going to need stitches, not to mention whatever else she's hiding."

"Of course I saw her! She's weaponized my damn knife drawer!" Julia snapped, passing Frank as she started to pace. The curtains of the living room had all been drawn shut immediately after Julia had ushered in Rebel. The room was dark and only lit by the table lamps, and was starting to feel a little too cramped for her tastes. "I can't even get close to her, Frank! She's absolutely beside herself! I can't get her out of the kitchen, how am I supposed to get her to a hospital half-way across the city?"

"Do you at least have a plan?" Frank asked, and upon reading her expression accurately guessed her answer. "Jules, we have to tell someone. One way or another, someone's going to find out about her. And I've got the feeling that the people who're after her aren't all good guys."

"What, they followed her all the way from Sokovia?" Julia said, almost disbelieving.

"She did say that the Chairman was after her!" Frank pointed out. "She helped start a goddamn war, of course they'd chase her across half of Europe. They don't give a damn about who they hurt along the way. And what do you think they'll do when they learn about us?"

"They won't," Julia said, her jaw clenched as she continued to pace. It sounded like a lie and Frank knew it.

"You don't know that."

"We just have to be careful. To be honest, I'm more afraid of her right now than anything else. She's not the same person we remembered."

"As if we knew her at all," Frank said under his breath.

She had just opened her mouth to retort (even though he had a point), when a knock came on the door.

Julia and Frank exchanged bewildered looks. "Are you expecting someone else?" Frank asked.

"No," Julia said, frowning. Who could be here at this time? She glanced at her cell phone — no messages to indicate a friend was coming over. And Julia was too on edge to consider this just a coincidence. Someone arriving unannounced just hours after an injured runaway? Someone must have discovered where she went.

For a moment, she'd hoped the newcomer would pass, but then they knocked again, more insistent this time. Julia hesitated before finally heading towards the front door; she didn't have to say anything
to Frank, who automatically positioned himself in front of the kitchen threshold, just in case.

Praying to God that it wasn't the police coming here to arrest her for harboring a known fugitive, Julia closed her eyes, took a deep breath, before grabbing the knob and yanking the door open.

On the other side stood a single man. Middle-aged, with an open expression, but with deceptively intelligent eyes. Julia knew his type anywhere. A government agent.

"Julia Frink?" The man asked with a smile. He pulled a badge from his pocket and presented it to her. "Hello, I'm Agent Coulson, I'm with SHIELD. I'm here to help."

"SHIELD?" Julia repeated, closing the door a little so he couldn't see into the apartment. What the hell was SHIELD doing here? "You can't mean —"

"Yeah, from the Incident, that's us," Agent Coulson nodded knowingly, as if this were a conversation he's had a lot recently. He looked like a government agent, but didn't have the attitude of any she'd ever met before. His calm, almost friendly demeanor was rather disarming. "Not the best coming out party but what can you do. We make it our business to assess and handle any problems that appear to be, well, beyond the realm of normal. Superhuman, I guess you could say."

"I-I have no idea what you're talking about," Julia said, licking her lips. MI-5 hadn't said anything about SHIELD. They'd briefed her on almost every conceivable force that might come her way, but not this. She had no idea what to make of this man, much less his claims.

"I have it on good authority that you're currently harboring a young teenaged girl in your kitchen," Agent Coulson said, still with that light-hearted tone. "We've been following her trail for the past couple days; we believe she's connected to a string of terror attacks across Europe, including the one today on Tower Bridge."

"What do you want with her?" Julia demanded, deciding to forgo the veil of ignorance and get straight to the point.

"We're trying to contain the situation before it gets further out of hand," Agent Coulson replied, then gestured forward. "I promise, SHIELD means no harm to you or the girl. Please, if you could, I'd like to come inside and see for myself."

Julia studied this man, this Agent Coulson for a long moment; she had no reason to believe a word he said, but the badge looked legit, and she had to admit, there was something trustworthy about him that she liked. Reluctantly, she pulled back, opening the door to let him inside. "She's in the kitchen. But please, be careful. I've tried reasoning with her but she's completely unresponsive."

Frank fixed Coulson with a suspicious look, and only backed off at the sight of the badge. Exchanging another look with Julia, he added, "She's hurt pretty bad, although we can't get too close to tell just what. You really think you can help?"

"Don't worry, Mr. Crain, I have experience in matters like this," Agent Coulson said. "Most of them are resistant to being brought in. It's just a matter of convincing them it's their best option."

Frank let out a snort. "I don't think it's quite the same thing."

"I'm sure it's not that —" Agent Coulson began, just as Frink opened the door. Then he saw the inside of the kitchen, the utter chaos inside. He went silent, doing a double-take. "...Oh. I see what you mean."

The kitchen had been rendered almost unrecognizable. The lights were off, cupboards open,
glassware shattered, the window curtains torn. Faint sunlight filtered through, picking up on the shiny spots of blood splattered across the floor.

"What's her name?" Agent Coulson asked, peering into the kitchen. All you could see of Rebel was her white shoes peeking out from behind the fridge — she had sequestered herself in a tiny alcove against the wall, just out of their line of sight.

"We...we don't know," Julia admitted, a little frustrated with herself. No matter what state she was in, Rebel seemed determined to keep her identity to herself. "She refused to tell us when we first met; for our own safety, she said. And now, well...she's not even speaking. I'd be surprised if you could get anything out of her at all."

"You called her Rebel in your piece," Agent Coulson said, before stepping into the kitchen.

"She doesn't respond to it," Julia told him. She knew, she'd already tried. "Besides, I'm not even sure if she read my work."

"Well, I suppose it's better than nothing," Agent Coulson said, more to himself than the other two. He took a breath before stepping into the kitchen, setting over a fallen stool, slowly rounding on the girl cowering in the corner. He kept his distance, so she could see him coming, and not react unpredictably.

It was hard to say what state she was in, but even Coulson could see it wasn't good. He was impressed she was even still awake, and tested his luck by moving in a little closer, so they were only ten feet away. He approached with a few wary words. "Hello? Look, um, Rebel, I'm not here to hurt you, okay? I'm a friend. I just want to help."

The girl flinched at his approach, but didn't move as he got closer. She was shaking from head to foot. There was a pool at her feel, dirty lake water dripping everywhere. There was also the distinct smell of gunpowder in the air.

"Hey there," He said softly, lowering to one knee on the tiled floor, keeping his palms up and open so Rebel would know she's unharmed. "You look like you've had a pretty rough day, huh?"

The girl stared at him with wide, haunted eyes. Gray eyes gleamed sharply against dirt-and-blood-covered skin. Her pupils were only pinpricks. Her breath came out short and fast. The knife trembled in her hand as she aimed the point at Coulson.

"I'm with SHIELD." Agent Coulson said. "And I'm here to take you home."

Then the girl said something, very quiet. Agent Coulson leaned in, asked kindly, "Sorry, I didn't catch that. Can you say it again, please?"


Eventually, the world grew warm again.

I found myself lying on a cot. I didn't remember how I got here. I didn't recognize the black walls,
the fluorescent lights. At this point, I was getting used to the feeling.

I blinked, wincing against the bright white light. I raised a hand to shade my eyes. As I rose to my elbows, a massive burst of pain erupted from my temple and I collapsed back onto the pillow, groaning.

"Easy there," said an oddly familiar voice. Male. "You've taken a pretty hard fall."

I immediately shot upwards to a sitting position, alarm sending every nerve on fire. My fists clenched, my knees raised, my feet slipped under me, ready to jump off at a moment's notice — right before a wave of dizziness hit me and I collapsed back, slumping against the wall.

"Damn," a second voice said, and I registered it as female. My vision was a blur as I tried to think past the nausea coming over me. "You weren't kidding when you said she's a lively one."

My breath came out in sharp gasps as my eyes finally focused on the two sitting on the bench opposite my cot. An average middle-aged man and an Asian woman who looked to be in her late twenties. She had dark wavy hair, an amused lilt to her expression. The man wore a plain black suit, black tie, and was currently focused on a tablet in front of him, not even looking at me.

I stared at the man. I couldn't believe I recognized him. "You. You w-were in Nice. You were part of that-that tourist couple, th-the one that took our ph-photo..."

The man picked his head up, cast me a pleasant smile. "Oh, so you do remember! I take it you're back to your old self? I'm asking because I've seen two very different sides of you, and I'm hoping that this is the dominant side because, well, you're a lot nicer than the other one."

"We honestly have no clue what your deal is." The woman said. She seemed more informal of the two, wearing a leather jacket and torn up jeans, sort of like me — only, you know, clean.

"Join the club," I muttered, bowing my head and studying my toes for a moment as I collected my breath. My feet were bare — they'd taken off my shoes. My yellow raincoat, the utility jacket. I was only wearing my jeans and my now-ripped shirt. I gaped. "D-did you take my clothes?"

"Ah, that's just a formality," the man said, raising his chin in an understanding nod of my shock. "Don't worry, we're having them washed. We'll get you cleaned up, too, once you help us out a little."

"Help out how?" I asked, casting them a suspicious frown. "Who the hell are you guys? Where am I? How did I even get here?"

"We're the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement, and Logistics Division; also known as SHIELD. I suppose you've heard of us."

I frowned at him, before shaking my head. My thoughts were still a jumble. The name sounded vaguely familiar but I couldn't recall where I'd last heard it.

"Huh," the man looked mildly impress. "Well, I forgot what that feels like. Most people know who we are, thanks to the Incident. Anyways, I'm Agent Coulson, and this is Skye, a member of my special task force. You're here on the Bus, a SHIELD jet currently circling the greater London area. As for how you got here, let's just say I'm really glad I took that semester abroad in Russia."

"You almost stabbed Coulson," Skye added with a smirk, earning a vaguely disapproving look from him. "Then we almost crashed the car leaving the apartment. You tried to escape five times — probably would've succeeded, too, but May's faster than she looks."
"We've kept you sedated since," Coulson said, and at my expression he added, "For your safety, not just ours. You stole a knife and cut yourself just trying to get out of the seat belt. You tried walking directly into traffic. We were afraid you were going to get yourself killed. Imagine our surprise when we realized you have a metabolism that burns through ketamine three times as fast as a regular human. We burned through half our supplies in under an hour."

"That's also one of our questions, by the way," Skye held up a finger. "How, uh, exactly can you do that?"

"I just...can," I could only shrug helplessly, tucking my knees under my chin and hugging my legs. I didn't like this, I didn't like all the talking and the voices and the new faces, while my brain was still in a fog. I was still trying to catch up to what happened. We were in London? Why were we in London? Oh, right, to see the reporters. But then... "I've been like this for... years now, I guess."

"So, you weren't born like this?" Agent Coulson asked, and when I shook my head he typed something into the tablet. I studied him for a moment, trying to match this man to the same one I saw back in sunny Nice. He'd seemed so different then; same accent, sure, he was still American, but everything else just seemed so off.

"W-wait, so you're a-a secret agent?" I said, raising a finger at Coulson. At his questioning look, I tucked my hand back and shook my head. "You look like my history teacher."

"Well," Coulson smiled. "I'm sure your history teacher is very handsome."

"My history teacher is a woman."

"Oh." Coulson backtracked a little. "Your history teacher must be a-a handsome lady, then."

"Look," Skye returned to the topic at hand. Leaning in, she said, "We need you to tell us what happened on the bridge, okay? Really, just everything that's happened to you. I mean, you're American, right? How the hell did you end up in Sokovia, a country that's had closed borders for over ten years?"

I stared at her, uncomprehending. I heard nothing else past her first sentence. "The-the bridge...?"

Oh, god.


"I-I can't," I whispered, shaking my head, suddenly gasping for air. It felt like I was being suffocated again. It's my fault it's my fault. You don't fight the Winter Soldier. "It wasn't supposed to happen like that. I-I never thought..."

"Look, we're just going to debrief you on what we know happened, okay?" Coulson raised a hand to calm me. Apparently, he could tell he wouldn't be getting anything useful out of me. "No questions right now. Just listen. Skye?"

Skye glanced at Coulson, and then to me: "On October 29th, we received an alert that a Sokovian satellite had been hijacked for exactly thirteen minutes. It wasn't a sanctioned move, so it was up to me to figure it out. I looked through the code, and the only thing I could find was a hacker's signature, Miss-Underscore-Chevious, who until now has never popped up before. I managed to trace their location to a public library in Novi Grad, Sokovia. This was the day after an unknown number, also from Sokovia, managed to reach a cellphone in New York City. I didn't think it was a
coincidence. Two days later, we got word of American spies exposed in Novi Grad, but the thing is, we don't have any American spies in Novi Grad, so who could it possibly be?"

"You can imagine our concern when, on November 1st, civil war broke out in Sokovia," Coulson continued, raising his eyebrows at me. "We were starting to think these may all be related to the actions of one individual, although at that point we didn't have any proof. We kept looking for more disturbances, though. Like the attack in Nice, six days later. The few days the TIME came out with a special edition on a trio of some very interesting freedom fighters that were present at the battle in Novi Grad. By then, we knew who we were looking for. That's when you and met Agent May and I, pretending to be tourists. We were trying to gather intel on you and your friends. We didn't want to bring you in right away without knowing what we were dealing with.

"We were arranging an extraction team when the HMS Adelaide was attacked, and you three disappeared off the map." Skye continued. "For two days, we thought we lost you. Then, at 9:32AM yesterday morning, Tower Bridge failed to clean for an incoming freighter. The freighter failed to slow down in time, and crashed into the center of the bridge. At the same time, two separate explosions went off beneath each tower, blocking off exits for anyone trapped on the bridge. Then a helicopter appeared, bearing hostile agents of an unknown faction, which dropped onto the bridge below and engaged in combat with three unknown Enhanced individuals. They captured two of them, and eliminated the third. Or so we thought."

"We have video coverage of people on the walkway above you," Skye said, pulling out her own tablet and pulling up a video, showing me shaky footage from what appeared to be from a cell phone. "Civilians saw you falling in the river and never coming back up. We thought you were dead. That is, until we got reports of a deranged girl wandering the streets, bloody and speaking in Russian. At first, we thought you were a victim of the attack. It didn't take us long to figure out that wasn't the case. Coulson went out to collect you, and now you're here."

They went silent for a moment, allowing me to take all of this in.

My hands clenched and unclenched. I started to rock a little, my eyes sweeping across the room. It was so small. The door had no handle on this side. I couldn't see any viable escape. I had already gauged the two agents before me; I could probably take them both on. Skye didn't look too formidable, physically. Coulson, on the other hand, I wasn't so sure. His easy-going nature made it hard to get a read on him.

_Calm down. Breathe._ My fight-or-flight response was making my anxiety worse. I closed my eyes, took a deep breath. "H-how many people were hurt?"

"There were five casualties, over two dozen injuries." Coulson reported without looking at his tablet. He tilted his head, fixed me with an inscrutable look. "I know this is a lot to take in. I have to admit, I'm a bit impressed — well, alarmed — with everything you've achieved on your own. Right now, I just want to know your name. We've been chasing you for over a week and we still don't know who you are."

My eyes flicked up to meet Coulson's. I didn't want to tell them. Maybe they were SHIELD, but that didn't mean I trusted them.

But I guess I had to give them something. At least let them think I was compliant. I raised my hand, touching the gauze taped over my right eye. I could feel something pulling wrong as I frowned. Had they stitched me up?

"Mia." I murmured, my gaze dropping again. "My name is Mia."
"Well, Mia, I'll tell you what," Coulson said with a smile, pleased with having something to call me now. "We're going to take you home, okay? Consider us a free ticket to anywhere in the world. From what I've gathered, everything that's happened to you has been no fault of your own. You've just been dealt a bad hand."

No way. This couldn't be true. I stared at him, aghast. "Wait, really? I can go home? Back to New York, just like that?"

"Just like that," Coulson said. "You're Enhanced, but you blend in well, and you've shown us you aren't malicious. We'll take you home right now, no questions asked, no catches, and never see you'll never see us again. But you have to promise us something, Mia. You can't use your powers, your gifts, whatever you want to call them, or get involved in unnecessary danger. You go back to your old life, whatever it was. As far as anyone is concerned, none of this ever happened."

It was the best thing I've heard since...well, since waking up in Sokovia. SHIELD was here, they saved me, they were taking me home.

I was going home.

I let out a little laugh, and I probably would've started to cry if I hadn't remembered something else.

"Well, I'll take that as a yes, then," Coulson said, hefting himself up, straightening his suit. Skye stood up as well. "We'll get you some clean clothes, a fake pass —"

"Wait." I said, looking up at them. "What about the twins?"

Coulson paused. A line appeared between his brow. "I'm sorry?"

"The twins, my friends," I said, coming to my feet as well. Coulson stepped back slightly — I was just a bit taller than him. "You said they were captured on the bridge. The Komitet has them! You're going to save them, too, right?"

"I, uh," Coulson hesitated. "Well, they weren't our priority, Amelia. And right now, we have more pressing matters to deal with —"

"Wait, did you just say Komitet?" Skye interrupted, earning an annoyed look from Coulson. She ignored it, only gave me an intense look. "As in, the KGB? They've been hunting you?"

"Uh, yeah," I said, frowning as I glanced between the two of them. "Why?"

"So, you know where would they take your friends?" Skye demanded.

"To the Crucible," I replied immediately, like it was obvious. How could they not know? Weren't they following me this whole time? Surely, they'd know what I've been running from. "It's where we were trained. Made. That's what we've been trying to get away from this entire time."

"It's nothing, it's —" Coulson was interrupted again by Skye, who smacked him on the arm, giving him a significant look, a small head tilt in my direction. Coulson glanced at me, then held up a finger and said, "One moment, please."

I stepped back, more than a little confused, as the two agents left my tiny cell. I almost wanted to follow them out the door, but it slid back too fast. Still, I approached, pressing my ear against the black metal. The walls were thick, but my hearing was better than what this cell was made for. And I was far too curious not to try.
I could hear them, muffled voices. Agent Coulson and Skye were right outside, having a heated discussion.

"...can help us! She's knows where it is! We can save them!"

"Absolutely not. We have no idea what it is or what we're getting ourselves into. Besides, rescuing Ward and Simmons is not our mission. If it were, Director Fury would —"

"Director Fury doesn't know about her!"

"I wouldn't bet on that. If we take her home, then she's a free citizen. That was the deal."

"Well, make a different one!"

"The answer is no, Skye. I won't be responsible for the life of a civilian, Enhanced or not. And after everything she's been through? I think it's enough."

"But Coulson —"

"I said enough, Skye! This isn't a debate. I'm not sanctioning another mission until we have our full team back."

I heard footsteps, and fell back to my cot in time for the door of my cell to open again. Coulson stepped inside, trying to appear at ease, but I could see the tenseness around his eyes. Behind him, Skye glowered sullenly in the hallway, her arms crossed.

"Sorry about that," Coulson said, trying to give me a smile as if everything was all right. "Look, Mia, I know you want to save your friends, but it's just not possible. I only have so many agents at my disposal and right now I can't afford to risk any. And I can't ask you to put your life on the line, either."

"Not even if I volunteer?" I asked, holding out on one last bit of hope.

Skye picked up her head, stepped forward, but as if anticipating this, Coulson raised a hand to stop her, all without looking behind him. "No, Mia. It's for the best. Like I said before, we're trying to protect you. Putting you back in the firing line is the absolute last thing I ever want to do."

"Please," I said, begging, my eyes starting to burn again. The encroaching helplessness, the crushing fear. I couldn't do this to the twins. I couldn't abandon them like this. "Please, you don't understand. The Crucible, it's... it's awful. I barely made it out on my own. The twins are the only reason I'm alive, Agent Coulson. The only way I got out. I wouldn't have survived this long without them. They're...they're all I had left."

My voice cracked at the end, and I ducked my head to swallow a weak sob. I didn't want to cry, especially in front of strangers. My face flushed with embarrassment, which didn't make the urge to cry any easier.

Agent Coulson sighed. "Just...get some rest, Mia. We'll be back with some more questions but right now it's probably best if you take a breather. Think about home. You're almost there. It's over now."

And with that, he stepped back, and the door slid closed. I was alone again.

It's over now.

God, how useless was I? Everything we did, everything we've been through — I'm finally in the
hands of people who could actually do something, but they say no. And I was in no position to fight them on this. I slumped back onto the cot, head in my hands.

There was a mirror on one wall, above the sink and toilet. I considered it for a moment before standing up and shuffling over.

I knew it was bad before I saw myself, but somehow, I still wasn't ready. Maybe it was the massive bandage on my forehead, or the wide array of bruises across my face and arms. It was like the Winter Soldier hadn't left a single part of me untouched. I winced as I rubbed my side. At least that wasn't too bad. Maybe my bones had healed somewhat in the past day or so.

Not that it would help the twins any.

Reaching up, I picked at the tape holding down the gauze on my face. I grimaced slightly as I peeled it away, and shuddered at what was underneath.

When the Winter Soldier struck me, and sent me over the bridge, he had caught right over my eye. A deep vertical cut split my eyebrow in half, now held together by seven black stitches.

I prodded at it tenderly, wincing. Well, that was going to leave a scar. By the time I finally got home, I'd be an entire canvas of them.

I found more stitches on my arm, either from blows I couldn't remember or maybe from hurting myself trying to escape SHIELD. I was still a little surprised I could even stand. Considering the fall I took, I expected to be more broken.

Broken or not, I was still exhausted, and I drew away from the mirror, collapsing back on the bed. I wanted to cry. Hurt, physically and emotionally, I wanted to sleep as Coulson suggested, but I couldn't bear the thought, either. How could I rest easy when Pietro and Wanda were in trouble?

And it was my fault, too. If I hadn't left their sides, if we'd taken a different route, then maybe it wouldn't have happened. If we just left for America from France, maybe the Komitet would've never caught up with us.

Why did I have to suggest going to Frink? It only slowed us down. I could've sent her an email or something. I didn't have to see her in person. God, I was such an idiot…

I could be home right now. I could be safe. We all would be.

But now I'd be going home alone. I wasn't sure how I could ever live with that.

✮✮✮

Hours passed. I didn't have a watch but I knew from the grumble in my stomach that I had missed a meal or two. It had to be, what, evening now? It was frustrating not knowing the exact time.

As Coulson promised, I eventually got to shower, under strict supervision by Skye, who escorted me down the hall to a small white bathroom. She didn't say much to me, and I could tell from her expression that she was still ticked with Coulson's decision. I caught a glimpse of the outside of my cell, more of the Bus — it really was a massive jet. Outside the small windows I could only see darkness.
There were no windows in the bathroom; I had this crazy idea of escape before realizing how insane that was. I was over ten thousand feet in the air, where the hell could I go? Not even a Super Soldier could fly.

The bathroom itself was plain, utilitarian, but at least the water was hot. Skye remained just outside the door — unlocked, but closed — as I tested the water. I noticed fresh clothes waiting on the sink counter. I checked the tags, frowned, then called out, "How do you guys know my size?"

"Lucky guess," Skye called back. "May's good at sizing people up."

"Whose May?" My first mental image was of Aunt May, and it sent a stroke of terror in me; what would she think if she saw me like this?

"Agent Melinda May, the pilot. Coulson needed backup getting you onto the Bus. She's probably the toughest member on the team. Things have to be pretty bad if we have to call her in."

"Oh," I said, before stepping into the shower. I found myself ruminating on those words longer than I wanted to. Eventually, I said, 'I'm sorry, by the way. About giving you so much trouble. I never meant to hurt anyone.'

"Oh, it's fine," Skye sounded surprisingly lighthearted, which was relieving. "It's our job to hunt down people like you. Uh, what are you, exactly, if you don't mind me asking?"

I didn't answer right away. The water stung my stitched brow. "They said I'm a Super Soldier."

"What, like Captain America?" Skye sounded alarmed, maybe even impressed. "Who said that?"

"The scientists in the Crucible. The ones that made me." I massaged shampoo into my hair, staring at the blank shower wall in front of me.

"So, you were experimented on?" Skye asked, and it occurred to me that this must be the questioning Coulson mentioned earlier. Clever, to make it seem casual like this, so I'd be more forthcoming. "How did you end up there in the first place? The Crucible, I mean."

"Well, they didn't exactly ask permission before testing me," I replied, knowing that SHIELD probably wouldn't be able to get my identity out of these short details. It had been intentional, giving them only my nickname — no first name, no last name. I didn't want them to know who I was. How could I know that I could trust them yet? "I was kidnapped by the KGB. They faked my death so no one would look for me."

There came a low whistle. "Wow, and I thought I had it rough. So, you were kidnapped, turned into a Super Soldier against your will, then managed to escape with two other prisoners, and you've been on the run for the past week and a half. And you're how old?"

"Eighteen," I lied automatically. There was no way they'd take me seriously if they knew how young I really was. Of course, if Skye had read the TIME article, then she'd know I was lying…

"That's pretty young to be hijacking Soviet satellites."

I made a face, annoyed, as I rinsed my hair, reached for the conditioner. So, she hadn't read the article, but call me a hypocrite for not liking her inaccuracy. "I didn't hijack anything. I just…uncensored Sokovia's internet for a few minutes, that's all."

"To do what?" Skye snorted.
Raising my arms up to my head, I noticed all the thin red lines left by the Winter Soldier's knife. The color matched the red of my tattoo. In the back of my mind, I wondered why I had it. Why did the Crucible give it to me? The red star was in the same place, on the same arm as the Winter Soldier — the only difference being that his arm had been metal. What was its significance?

I belatedly remembered to reply. It sounded lamer out loud. "To send an email."

Laughter came from the other side of the door. "Are you serious? You hijacked a satellite just to, what, reconnect with your pals at home?"

"I didn't hijack — oh, never mind," I muttered, realizing it was a moot point. My voice was sharp when I added, "They think I'm dead, okay? No one knows where I am. No one knows how to find me. It was before I realized I was on my own, that I had to save myself. That I'm the only person I can trust."

"Oh," Skye at least had the decency to sound recalcitrant. "Sorry, Mia, I didn't realize…" She heaved a long sigh. "Look, I'm used to living under the radar, okay? I've spent half my life trying to avoid getting caught before, you know, SHIELD found me. I guess it sounds kind of strange, when you're on the run but want people to find you."

"You were on the run?" I asked, surprised. I overestimated how long it would take for me to clean my hair — I was always used to it being long, the amount of effort it took to clean. Now it was done in half the time.

"I was — am — a hacker," Skye corrected herself. "I used to work for the Rising Tide. You heard of them, right?"

"Vaguely."

"Well, they've heard of you, so if I were you I'd be careful before using your Miss Chievous handle again," Skye advised, then continued, "Anyways, yeah, I was on my own a lot. I learned to rely on myself. On what few friends I had. It's not easy. I mean, I wasn't outrunning explosions like you, but I know what it's like. To feel alone, to feel like the world doesn't care about you. And I didn't like them at first, but SHIELD means well. You can trust them. Or, well, you can trust Coulson."

"Do you?" I asked, as I stepped out of the shower, finally clean. The cooler air outside made all those little injuries across my body sting again.

There was pause on the other side of the door. "Most of the time. Doesn't mean we agree on everything. But he's the boss, so..."

"Well, if there's one I like about being on the run," I said, finally dressed again as I opened the door. Skye's back was to me, and she turned to look me. "It's that I don't have to listen to anyone."

She offered me a small smirk. "Good point."

My hair dripped on the way back to the cell. My heart thudded in my chest at the thought of being locked in that room again. The new clothes, a pale-yellow shirt and unripped jeans, were starchy and itched against my skin. Whoever this May was, she really did have my size down.

"I know it's not much," Skye said, as she unlocked the cell door with an electronic number code. She didn't seem concerned that I saw it. "But it's the best we can do on the Bus."

I didn't know what she was talking about at first, until I saw the plate of food waiting on the cot. Sandwich, a can of peaches, bottled water.
Just twenty minutes ago, my stomach was growling. Now, looking at food directly in front of me, I couldn't be less appetized.

It wasn't that the food looked bad. Whoever made the sandwich didn't skimp on the ham, and there was lettuce and mustard. But as the door closed behind me, and I sat back on the cot, I could make myself eat it. My mouth was completely dry. I could only manage a sip of water before my stomach coiled with a sickening twist.

The shower had felt good. But I couldn't stave away the guilt that followed, for indulging in it.

I set the plate on the floor and lied back on the cot, pressing my face into the pillow. I wanted to clear my head. I didn't want think of anything. I didn't want to exist.

I couldn't relax. Although my bones were tired, my mind was still awake, constantly cycling through a thousand useless ideas. How could I save Wanda and Pietro? How could I go home and leave them behind to suffer, after everything they've done for me?

Eventually, I picked myself back up, reached for the sandwich. I might as well eat something, I reasoned to myself. At least keep my strength up. Hurting myself wasn't going to help the twins any.

I took a bite of the sandwich. I tried not think how good it tasted as I chewed. When was the last time I ate? How was SHIELD going to send me home? Was there really no way to convince them to help the twins? Would I be able to do anything, once I got home?

How could I save them if I wasn't supposed to use my powers again? I couldn't think of any option that wouldn't break Coulson's terms of my private identity.

I was half-way through the sandwich when I heard a clank.

My head snapped up to see the cell door opened again.

Skye charged into the room. Behind her, followed another man, with brown hair and a buttoned-up shirt. He looked extremely uncomfortable, but didn't hold a candle to the light that gleamed in Skye's eyes. "You want to save your friends? So do we."

"What?" I said, mouth full with sandwich. I swallowed hard, glancing at the nervous-looking man. "Who're you?"

"I'm Agent Fitz, Leo Fitz," He replied, with a curt nod of his head, although he seemed so wound-up it was more like a twitch. He had a strong Scottish accent. Glaswegian, maybe? "Gemma Simmons was — is — my best friend. My partner. She was kidnapped by the KGB on a mission three days ago, along with Agent Ward. Odds are, they're already dead —"

"But we can take those odds," Skye continued fervently. She inhaled through her nose, her shoulders tense, and I had the feeling she was trying to convince herself as much as she was trying to convince me. "I know I'm new to this whole SHIELD thing, but I'm not going to sit back and twiddle my thumbs when I know I can be doing something. That's one thing I've learned here so far, we don't wait around, we take action, right? If Director Fury won't assign a team to save Gemma and Ward — and those twins — then I'll assign my own."

"Does Coulson know about this?" I asked, having a feeling I already knew the answer. My chest filled with butterflies, glee and fear and excitement all ready to burst out.

"No," Fitz said, rubbing his hands nervously. He glanced about the room before his gaze settled on me, his brow knitted together. "It'd be an unsanctioned mission. We'll be entirely on our own. No
radio, no back-up, completely in the dark. No one will know where we are, or where we went. If something goes wrong…"

"It won't go wrong," Skye picked up the sentence as Fitz trailed. She pressed her lips together, raised her eyebrows at me. "We know what we're doing. We've got a ship, we've got the weapons, now we just need someone to show us the way. You in?"

I rose to my feet. "Of course. But you're missing just one other thing."

Skye blinked at me, confused. "What's that?"

I smiled. "A plan."

✭✭✭

It had to be midnight now, if not later. Most of the Bus was completely dark as Skye and Fitz snuck me to the back of the jet. Were we still over London? Aside from us, the Bus seemed completely abandoned. I wondered where Coulson and this Agent May would be. In the cockpit?

The two agents were having a hissed conversation — Skye in the back, Fitz in the front, leaving me an uncomfortable eavesdropper in the middle of an argument.

"This is a bad idea," Fitz muttered under his breath. "This is a very bad idea. What am I doing, disobeying direct orders? Coulson would have my hide. Fury would have my head. And May…" he shuddered at the thought.

"Don't chicken out now!" Skye whispered loudly, keeping her head low as we crept through a kitchen. My footsteps made not a sound, while their shoes squeaked obnoxiously. I had a feeling Skye and Fitz weren't trained in stealth. "You already agreed to this, Fitz. J-just think about Gemma, okay? We're doing this for her."

"But what are we thinking?" Fitz demanded, throwing out his hands. "Bringing a civilian teenager into this? I know SHIELD's had unethical methods in the past, but this is really pushing it."

"I'm eighteen," I pushed, a little annoyed even if it was a lie. I volunteered, hadn't I? The only one responsible for me was myself. "I want to do this. What else do you need?"

"It's called personal responsibility," Fitz snapped, pausing by a doorway, checking to see if the way was clear before moving ahead. "And since you're not an agent, then you're a part of ours. If anything goes wrong, if anything happens to you, it'll be on our heads! And that's besides the fact that we don't know if we can trust you or not. You're just some odd girl who's connected to almost half a dozen terrorist acts, how do we know you're really not a part of them?"

"Will you relax, Fitz? She doesn't need a babysitter." Skye said. "She's saved lives! She's a Super Soldier, and probably better trained for this than you."

Fitz came to a stop so fast that I nearly ran into him. He whirled around, jaw hanging. "A Super Soldier? Now you tell me?"

"What?" I frowned, throwing Skye a look before going back to Fitz. "Is that good or bad?"

"Well, it's bad because the KGB are now apparently equipped to create their own super soldiers, for
one!" Fitz said almost immediately, looking increasingly alarmed. I guess a lack of reaction on Skye and my own part didn't help matters. He huffed, then added grudgingly, "But I suppose it's good, since we have at least one person in this mad plan who has combat experience."

"Neither of you have been in a fight?"

"Well, we have," Skye admitted, making a face. "Just not, you know, willingly. I mainly work with computers."

"And I am a man of science!" Fitz said fervently. "My skills are better served in a controlled environment, with constants and variables that I can manage! Not getting myself caught in the middle of a gunfight."

"Fitz, remember what I said about relaxing?" Skye said. "If everything goes well, it won't be you that's fighting, okay? Besides, I thought you said you had something that could help us."

"I do, it's just..." Fitz shook his head. "It's untested, that's all. There are too many unknown quantities here for me to be confident in the outcome."

He led us down a set of metal stairs. "I've got most everything ready in the lab. Just need to run it by you guys. Then we take the quinjet, shut down the security measures long enough to launch, go to the Crucible, save Ward, Gemma, and those friends of yours...and come back alive with the hope that we still have our jobs after going against everything SHIELD stands for."

Skye snorted. "You think we're going to have jobs after this? I'm already on probation. I'll probably never see the light of day after this."

Disbelieving, I asked Skye, "Why risk it, then?"

She just shrugged. "What have I got left to lose? It's not like Coulson's going to put us in front of a firing squad."

Fitz muttered something under his breath. It sounded a lot like 'I wouldn't get your hopes up.'

We reaching the bottom landing, stepping into a glass-and-white-metal room. A lab, as Fitz said, with long metal tables, a variety of machines and what looked like a small clinic. There were a mess of test tubes, microscopes, computers, and gutted drones everywhere. Fitz looked only a smidge more comfortable as he headed over to the nearest table.

It looked like gadgetry from a Bond film. What looked like a several different types of grenades, a pair of night vision goggles, and extendable batons. On stands were a set of three pistols, silvery metal with blue charging lights — some sort of futuristic, experimental design, unlike any gun I'd ever seen before.

"For this mission, I decided it'd be best if we utilized these," Fitz looked particularly proud as he gestured to them. "The Night-Night Gun, as I like to call it. An invention between myself and Gemma, each one is equipped with tranquilizing bullets. Thanks to our use of dendrotoxin, a single bullet can take down a full-grown man in less than six seconds."

"Non-deadly?" I asked, picking up one of the pistols, holding it at arm's length. The weapon was surprisingly light. Releasing the cartridge, I counted five charges inside.

"Yes," Fitz nodded once, glancing away for a moment. "Neither Skye nor myself are authorized for lethal weaponry."
"They don't trust me," Skye said, looking a little pleased herself.

"And I am a conscientious objector."

"Which means he can't shoot straight," Skye told me.

"Anyways," Fitz gave her the stink eye before refocusing himself to the topic at hand. "As you can see here, we're pretty well-stocked otherwise. Everything here, from the smoke grenades to the electric baton, are for incapacitation only. Thankfully, everyone here doesn't seem to have a problem with this. Considering what we believe the Crucible to contain, we'll all be carrying extra cartridges for the Night-Night gun."

"We also have tactical gear waiting for us in the storeroom," Fitz continued as he pulled extra munitions from beneath the table. "Cold climate gear, since the Black Diamond mountains are infamous for their year-round winter weather. Some natural phenomena caused by ground elevation, jet streams, and northeast winds from Russia —"

"Not here for a science lesson," Skye said, rolling her eyes. "Let's keep it moving, Fitz."

"Right, and this," Fitz grunted as he hauled up a large object from beneath the table. It was wrapped in a thick green cloth, which he pulled off, revealing something round and circular underneath. At first, I thought it was a giant turkey platter, until I saw the leather straps and magnetic bindings. Then Fitz flipped it over, turning the concave shape into a convex one — and revealing a bright red star painted directly in its center. "Is something I've been working on ever since we looted that, er, KGB bunker a few weeks back. We found ten pounds of unused Vibranium, who knows what they were planning to do with it, but it's ours now. Yep! So that's what I did. A shield. I made a shield."

"It was Coulson's idea."

Skye had a dumbfounded look on her face. She jerked a finger at it. "You made a replica of Captain America's shield…!"

"It's not a replica!" Fitz complained, throwing out his hands in annoyance. He propped up the shield, said, "It's a real shield! Did you not hear the part about the Vibranium? Okay, yes, Coulson wanted it made to the same specs as Captain Roger's shield, but it is not a replica —"

"Why that, though? You could've made literally anything out of it — an iron man suit, a gun, hell even a sword — but instead you just made a shield for Coulson's little cosplay?"

"First of all, we didn't have enough for a suit, and —"

"Still, you could've been a little bit more creative. What the hell are we supposed to do with this?"

"I imagine, and it's just a guess here, it's to protect our very fleshy, delicate, not-bulletproof tiny human bodies —"

"But it's so old-fashioned —"

"Captain Freaking America, your beloved national hero, uses the exact same model —"

"And he's ninety-five years old! Besides, I don't think anyone wants to be Captain America when they could be Iron Man —"

"It's perfect." I said, staring at the shield, running my hand over its smooth surface. Aside from the star, it was unpainted. The metal was cool and almost slippery under my touch. "You're letting me use this?"
Fitz and Skye inhaled at once, glaring at each other like they wanted to continue the argument. Skye raised an eyebrow at him, and Fitz huffed, crossing his arms. "Yes, in spite of my reservations about you, it's probably suitable that you be the one to use this, being a super soldier and all."

"All right. Just one question, though," I said, raising an eyebrow. "What's its melting point? How much heat can it stand before I'm toast? The KGB has these guys called Extremis soldiers and they, uh, they tend to get pretty hot under the collar."

"Uh, well, let me put it this way," Fitz made a face, pressing his hands together and pointing at the shield. "That thing can survive a direct hit from a nuclear blast. Whatever these Extremis soldiers are, they won't be able to get through that, trust me. That shield was designed in a time when man had just created the most destructive force in all time — our old friend Howard Stark, who helped Oppenheimer become Death, also made one of the few things to protect against it."

"Earning some good karma, huh?" Skye smiled, crossing her arms. "I guess Oppenheimer had to feel proud of something."

Fitz nodded approvingly. "The shield's one of the best tools we've got right now, and only the best is gonna do when we save Gemma."

"Coulson's not gonna like it." Skye pointed out.

"Well," Fitz pursed his lips, puffing out his chest in what I assumed to be a show of courage and decisiveness, but it was marred by his slightly trembling voice. "W-what Coulson doesn't know won't hurt him."

"Right," Skye said, failing to hide a smirk. She stuck out her wrist, showing a silver metal bangle on it. "Well, since we've all agreed to break a dozen laws by saving Gemma and Ward, you think you can break one more and get this off?"

"Ah, yes," Fitz puttered over, picking up a tiny screwdriver.

As he fiddled with the bracelet, Skye looked me up and down, and said to him, "You know what would be even more awesome? A cool outfit for our new friend here."

Fitz hesitated. "I beg your pardon?"

"Well, I mean, if she's our Captain America, she might as well look the part, right?" Skye said with a big grin. "Come on, I can be a nerd, too. You've got to have something lying around, right?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Fitz mumbled, turning his attention back to the bracelet.

"Oh, come on, I know you, Fitz," Skye urged, casting me a wink even though I wasn't sure what I wanted out of this. "You're prepared for anything. And Mia thinks it's a good idea, too, right, Mia?"

"Uh, yeah," I said, shifting awkwardly on my feet. I glanced at the shield, then back at Fitz, who looked extremely conflicted now. "Sure."

"It hasn't been tested yet," He said.

"It's going to be." Skye replied.

Fitz glared at her for a moment before finally admitting: "I might have something in storage. Wait here."
I stepped onto the quinjet. "So, uh, how do I look?"

Skye turned. She had changed into white snow gear, a pair of goggles strapped to her head. Then gasped, clapping her hands together in front of her mouth. "Uh, you look awesome, that's what!"

"Really?" I said, looking down at myself. "I look like a clown."

The outfit Fitz left for me in the box had been custom fatigues from World War II — as guessed by the type of helmet I wore, the same the US Army had in 1941. That wasn't the clowny part to me. No, it was the bright white star on my chest, sewn into the quilted blue double-breasted jacket I wore, complete with brass buttons. Along with the helmet, I had a pair of motorcycle goggles with red lenses, to better see in the winter. Then there were the olive-green jodhpurs, baggy around the thighs, patched around the knees from previous use. A utility belt, with a few smoke bombs and electric cartridges for the Night-Night pistol I carried at my hip. Over my combat boots I wore gaiters, which would probably be useful since we'd be dropping in the middle of a snowy mountainside. Still, it didn't stop me from feeling like I'd just stepped off from a 40's movie set.

The only thing of my own I wore was the striped scarf Pietro gave me, tucked around my neck. It was a little warm right now, but I felt better wearing it.

Fitz, who'd just come aboard with a box in his arms, took a cursory glance at me before setting the box down in one corner of the ship. He had changed as well, into a white turtleneck, snow pants, a jacket. I noted that neither of them was actually geared beyond winter weather. "A bit old-fashioned, but it'll do. I'm just glad it fits. Last-minute tailor jobs are not really my strong suit."

"It fits all right, nothing pinches," I said, before shifting the shield on my back. Although I was used to carrying a backpack, the strange weight of the shield was offsetting my balance a little, and the traps pulled tight around my shoulders. "At least, nothing that shouldn't. What is this stuff, anyways?"

"Old World War Two fatigues," Fitz said over his shoulder as he headed for the cockpit. "During the start of the war, the SSR stockpiled gear in the hopes of creating more super soldiers, but it never came to fruition. You're wearing one of their unused outfits. I suppose they were planning on adding female infantry to the roster at some point."

"And what's the deal with the giant star on my chest?"

"So, they shoot at you and not at us."

"Oh. Well, fair enough." I said with a shrug. "Are we ready to go?"

"Just one more minute," Skye said, sitting down and opening a laptop. "I'm just disabling the security systems, looping the feeds. Coulson and May won't know we're gone until it's too late."

"I'll activate cloaking functions now, then," Fitz said, and I watched, fascinated as he brought the quinjet to life with a series of flips of switches. The floor beneath me rumbled, and the back ramp whirred as it closed, encasing us in a dark cabin, flickering with small neon lights. "Skye, you've got the bay doors, correct?"

Loud typing noises behind me. "Already on it. They should open in three, two —"
"Bingo," Fitz said, gripping the throttle as the metal wall in front of us split open, revealing a dark blue sky, and London glittering below. He jerked his chin to the co-pilot seat. "Mia, if you may. Set the coordinates for the Crucible. We should have enough fuel to get to Sokovia and back in a few hours."

"On it," I said, trying not to look too excited as I slipped into the cockpit. I had never flown before, not even in a normal plane. And now I was sitting in the cockpit of one of the most advanced aircrafts in the entire planet. "You know how to fly this, right?"

"Don't insult my intelligence, please," Fitz said, somewhat offhand as he eased the quinjet into the air. It wobbled in his grip, but the craft remained steady as he steered it into open air. "Anything with a hard drive, I can command. Skye, how does it look?"

"Good to go," She called back. "Their systems will be off line for another two and half minutes. That should be enough time to slip off their radar before it comes back online."

"Better strap in then," Fitz said, and I reached for the straps behind me. "Just hold on, Gemma. We're coming for you."
Finally get to use this one! Had to reveal the outfit before she uses it for the first time. I drew this before I gave her the helmet so...just imagine it in your head I guess lol (the url at the bottom is incorrect, I changed my tumblr username to rebelcolumbia)

Chapter End Notes

I swear I came up with the schoolteacher joke before watching the recent episodes of Agents of HYDRA.

So we’re with Season 1 Agents of SHIELD here (so the core 6 members), which I think ties in correctly to Iron Man 3. Gosh, Season 1 is just full of nostalgia and pain.
Everyone was so young and sweet back then… (Fitz and Coulson are my favs, and Skye/Daisy is a close third).
Chapter Twenty-Nine

Chapter Summary

State of My Mind - Shinedown
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JZKExBzDbzM

Chapter Notes

I forgot to mention it last time, but I wanted to thank all of you for all of the comments! It’s made me so happy, and it always inspires me to keep writing. Thanks so much again!

These last few chapters have been pretty long, which I’m not sure if I like or not. Are they too long? Either way, it’s probably not going to stay that way forever. Maybe expect some shorter chapters in the future.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

"Are you sure you're ready for this?" Skye asked.

The copilot seat could spin around. I turned to frown at her. "What do you mean?"

We had been flying for about two hours now — another forty-five minutes until touch down. I kept looking down at the digital map on the panel, watching as our blinking blue dot got closer and closer to the red dot in Sokovia. The quinjet shook and rattled around us as Fitz steered us through a heavy winter storm.

"It's just…" Skye pursed her lips, tapped two fingers together. She had put the laptop aside, and had taken out a tablet. From the looks of it, she'd been playing Angry Birds. "You were just thrown off a bridge and pulled yourself out a freezing winter. I've seen your scars. It seems a lot to be asking of you, you know. We barely gave you enough time to recover."

"It's fine," I shrugged. To be honest, I was wide awake. The thought of resting now was unthinkable. "I can still walk, right? I know what I'm doing."

"Right," Skye said, although the look she gave me said she didn't quite believe it. Like she was just humoring me. "So, what can you tell us about the Crucible?"

"It's an old fortress in the mountainside," I said. "Renaissance, German influence. White stone that blends in with the weather. Underground is a Cold War bunker. Security is old, analog, Seventies era. Still tough to get through, you can't hack it." I added with a sympathetic wince to Skye's pained
expression. "It goes deep into the mountain, beyond the castle. No windows. At least five sub levels I'm aware of."

"Aware of?"

I paused. I realized I had never told SHIELD this. I almost assumed they already knew. "I don't remember what happened to me while I was in the Crucible."

"Wait, you don't remember?" Fitz, who'd apparently been listening in, suddenly swiveled to give me a look of alarm. "You have amnesia? Why didn't you say anything before? Ugh, see, I knew this was a bad idea..."

"How can you remember the Crucible if you have amnesia?" Skye spoke over Fitz worried muttering, throwing him an annoyed glance.

"It's not all gone. It's coming back to me, in bits and pieces," I explained. I understood Fitz' concern. I wasn't entirely sure how reliable my memory was myself. "I remember enough of the Crucible to know where they'd keep the twins. And probably your Ward and Simmons, too."

"Well, that's good," Skye said, kicking the back of Fitz' seat. "See, it's going to be fine, Fitz."

He just grumbled something under his breath, before flicking on the autopilot and swinging around so all three of us face each other. "So, what's the plan, then?"

"You brought your drones, right?" Skye asked, and at Fitz nod she continued with confidence. "When we hit the ground, you'll be controlling them. The drones will scout ahead while Amelia leads the way. We break into the Crucible, find Ward, Simmons, and the twins, get the hell back to the quinjet, and Bob's your uncle!"

Fitz threw her a morose look. "You make it sound so easy."

"I'll operate in an offensive capacity," I added, glancing at Fitz. He had a point. Skye spoke with a level of confidence that bothered me a little, like nothing could go wrong; but her plan was just vague enough to work. "Clear the way for you two, keep you defended. I can get us in the Crucible unseen. We'll have the element of surprise."

"I love the element of surprise," Skye grinned. "Call me crazy, but I think this actually going to work."

"Failure's not an option," I said, straightening a little. I had already failed once; the possibility of failing again terrified me. I couldn't let it happen.

Fitz snorted. "You sound like Coulson."

"You sound like Coulson trying to sound like Captain America," Skye added, but her tone was good-humored.

"What do you think he'll say when we get back?" I asked, looking between the two of them. "You guys didn't really talk about what would happen afterwards."

"Ah," Fitz made a face. "We'll cross that bridge when we get there."

That left a tiny seed of doubt in my stomach. Was I dooming Skye and Fitz by helping them like this? I had no doubt in my mind that something like this could get them court-martialed, or worse. Skye was already in trouble. Fitz may end up worse for willfully enabling her. And who knows
where I'd end up.

A silence fell over the quinjet. My ears popped as we began our descent. The cabin was dark, and I could only catch Fitz' face by the faint light of the blinking buttons in front of us, flashing green and white.

I knew that by doing this, I'd never go back to a normal life. SHIELD may end up a permanent fixture in my life. I may never be able to go home because of this.

More reasons why we couldn't fail, I realized. No matter the consequences, it would be worth it if we saved everyone.

"Mia, can I ask you something?" Fitz asked rather suddenly, and I turned my head to him. He glanced at me out of the corner of his eye, bobbed his head uncertainly. "I heard what happened when Coulson retrieved you and I — well, you said something strange to him."

"I did?" I frowned. I couldn't recall what happened after I fell off the bridge, only waking up in the Bus. Apparently, I had somehow found my way to Frink's apartment on my own, in that frantic daze that had so terrified Wanda and Pietro. I was surprised I managed to make it so far on my own like that.

"Yes, you, um," Fitz stammered, scratched the back of his neck. He seemed to have a difficult time looking at me, although maybe he was just concentrating on the dials and gauges before him. It was pitch black outside — there was no way to tell what or where we were heading. "You said you knew the man on the bridge. What did you mean by that, exactly? Who was he?"

"The man on the bridge," I repeated, and I didn't have to ask to know what Fitz meant. What I had meant. I knew immediately. "The Winter Soldier."

"The Winter…?" Fitz breathed. Even in the dim lighting, I saw his face pale. "No, that's impossible."

"What?" Skye piped in from behind us. It made me jump a little. I'd forgotten she'd be listening in. "Who's the Winter Soldier?"

"Only one of the deadliest assassins that ever existed." Fitz said in a low tone, the kind of severity that I recognized; the same tone the twins had, when they first told me about him. "The Winter Soldier has been credited with dozens of assassinations — starting way back in Nineteen-Sixty-Three."

1963? What did that have to do with… Then it hit me. I gaped at Fitz, shocked. "What, y-you don't mean —"

"The Kennedy assassination?" Skye interrupted with a gasp. "No way, I mean, it can't — that was fifty years ago! How could Mia have fought him on the bridge yesterday? He'd be, well, he'd be ancient."

Those dead eyes flashed in my mind. I'd seen his face. The Winter Soldier was not an old man.

"But he's just a myth," Fitz argued. "There have been no official sightings — ever. Not yesterday, and not fifty years ago. We have no actual proof he exists. Honestly, he's just a ghost story that SHIELD agents tell us at the Academy to scare the newbies."

But somehow, I believed it. I could believe the Winter Soldier responsible for the JFK assassination. Nothing, not even time, could stop that man. That machine. "It was him. He's real. He's the one who gave me this." I pointed at the stitches on my forehead. "I don't know what else you know about
him, but I can tell you this: he works for the Chairman, the KGB, and he might be there at the Crucible."

"But I just don't see how…" Fitz only shook his head. He still didn't believe me, unable to work past the logistics. I didn't understand them, either. But I trusted my eyes. I knew what I saw.

"Are you sure?" Skye sounded equally doubtful. "I mean, if we do run into him, what do we do? Can we fight him?"

I let out a laugh, but it was dry, humorless. "Fight him? You guys? I'm a super soldier, and look what happened to me. No way, the only thing you can do when you see him is run. Just run as far and fast as you can."

"And what will you do?" Fitz asked. "Will you fight him again?"

I sighed, sank into my seat. "I-if I have to. If it means the rest of you getting away."

"But he'll kill you!" Skye said, sounding horrified. I glanced over my shoulder at her. Skye was leaning forward in her seat, looking downright horrified. "Mia, you can't do that. You're just a kid, for Pete's sake!"

"Not to them," I said. "They kidnapped me, tortured me, turned me into a weapon. As far as they're concerned, I'm fair game. And I'm all right with that."

Skye was speechless for a moment. She sat back in her seat, blinking for a moment. Then she said, "Well, that's a little messed up."

✮✮✮

I stepped into the snow — it was thick, soft, and came up to my knees.

Behind me, the quinjet hummed quietly, its engines powering down. Fitz and Skye followed me down the ramp; Fitz surrounded by seven tiny, buzzing drones, tablet in his hand as he directed them.

Around us, the mountains silhouetted dark blue against an ink-black sky. It was an unusually clear night. A half-moon glittered in the sky, turning the snow around us a dusty silver-blue. There was only a soft wind, whistling gently through the forest around us. All was still, all was quiet.

It was beautiful.

It was dangerous.

If someone were to look out from the castle windows, they might be able to spot us in the moonlight. There was no falling snow to cover our tracks. If this mission blew up, then the clear night might be used against us.

*No, no don't think about that. Focus on what you have to do,* I told myself, as I turned to watch the quinjet slip back into camouflage mode. Up close, I could make out the mirror-like surface of the ship, tilting my head back and forth to see where the air bent around its form. From afar, though, it would appear utterly invisible.
“Looks like someone's home,” Skye whispered, even though there was no one around us. She jerked her chin up at the castle, more than half a mile up the mountain. Golden light flickered from its windows. In the freezing cold, it looked almost welcoming. "Should we knock?"

"We're not going up there," I told her, before making my way east, down the other side of the mountain, away from the castle. "I know another way in. One where they won't see us coming."

Skye and Fitz followed me without a word, seven drones buzzing ahead, weaving through columns of black trees. The woods were entirely silent. The snow muffled everything; the forest, our footsteps, even my own breathing.

Today was November 11th. Three weeks ago, I woke up in these same woods, no idea where I was or how I got here.

Twenty-two days. Twenty-two days I've been on the run, fighting for my life, just trying to get home. And now I was back, right where it all started.

Funny how things worked out, right?

It was about a twenty-minute trek through the snowy woods. I could've gone faster, but the snow and the agents in my wake slowed me down. We moved single-file, leaving only a single trail in the snow, to hide our numbers. I didn't know if anyone was out here tonight. I didn't want to risk it.

The door appeared out of the side of a hill. Like a bunker entrance, it was meshed into the landscape, impossible to see from above. I came to a stop about twenty feet away, crouching behind a tree. The crunch of footsteps as Skye and Fitz fell in behind me. I studied the door for a moment, the area around us.

"This is the same door I escaped through last time," I told them. I could see the flaking green paint, even from here. There was a security camera embedded under the cement overhang.

"Wouldn't that mean it'd have more security?" Fitz raised an eyebrow.

"Security to keep anything from getting out again," I replied, taking out my Night-Night pistol, I took aim. "Not to stop us from getting in."

And with that, I fired. The security camera went out in a burst of metal and sparks, and I leapt out of cover towards the door. Above the handle was a keypad. Before anyone could ask, I punched in a code — the same numbers I'd seen the Winter Soldier use in my memory. Hopefully, it still worked.

"Are you sure —" Skye started, but was interrupted by the hollow clank of the door unlocking. She pressed her lips together. "Oh. Never mind."

Tucking the pistol away, I pulled off my shield, held it before me as I reached for the handle. If memory served true, then there was nothing on the other side of the door. But I had to be safe.

Taking a deep breath, I gripped the handle before yanking it down, and snapping the door inward.

It swung, banging against the wall inside. It echoed down the long concrete hall, doors lined on either side. Dim yellow lights flickered.

It was completely empty.

My breath came out in a tiny rush. I lowered the shield a fraction of a degree. Nothing.

"Awesome," Skye stepped forward, brushing against my shoulder as she ducked inside the bunker,
Fitz behind her. The drones whirled around them like tiny body guards. But I stayed behind, staring down the long hall, blood pounding in my ears.

The Crucible. Something I'd only seen in my nightmares. Now it was before me, all too real.

A boy and a girl, huddled in a corner. Pale, shaking. Cold yellow light in the center, me standing underneath, illuminated.

A voice in my ear. "Attack."

I obeyed.

"Mia?" Skye called, jolting me out of my reverie. Brow knit in concern, she stepped forward, rested a hand on my shoulder. Perhaps she noticed my hesitation, because she asked, "Hey, are you ready for this?"

The images vanished as soon as they appeared. I shook my head, trying to clear my thoughts. I had a feeling being back here was only going to trigger more memories.

I checked myself one last time. Shield up, helmet on, pistol locked and loaded. I gave Skye a quick nod, putting on a brave face. "As I'll ever be."

Skye smiled back encouragingly and as I stepped in, I jerked my left arm up, past the door. Fitz let out a yelp when the shield snapped off the camera hiding in the corner.

Had it been any other day, I would've laughed at his reaction. But being here had killed any humor I had left. I just kept striding forward, not slowing down for them to collect themselves. "Whatever happens, stay behind me, okay? There's no one here but we've got no cover, so we have to be fast."

No sooner had I said that did a Crucible guard come walking around the corner.

Two pairs of eyes following me across the room. The girl pressed her hand against the glass wall.

Next to me, a coffee cup exploded. Ceramic shrapnel went everywhere. Its owner, a scientist at his computer, yelped and fell out of his chair. The rest went into a frenzy. She shouldn't be able to use her powers beyond her cell. They have miscalculated somehow.

A piece of the cup cuts my cheek. I raised my hand and it drew back with blood. I looked up at the girl. Our gazes meet. Her eyes flared red.

He was only a patrol guard, operating alone. I saw him before he saw us. Without thinking, I swung my arm, letting go of the shield.

The guard saw us, raised his gun. The shield zigzagged across the narrow hallway. He didn't get a chance to fire before the silver disk caught him under his chin, sent him flying back.

The shield rebounded off the far wall. It was like a giant, deadly Frisbee — for a second, I was terrified I'd lose control of it. I had to dive to catch it before it slipped past and possibly maimed the agents behind me.

The momentum of the shield spun me on my heel. As I recovered, I faced Skye and Fitz. He had taken cover behind Skye, who went ramrod straight. Their eyes followed the shield warily, before
throwing me disapproving looks.

I gave them a sheepish grin. "I'll, uh, I'll get the hang of it, I swear." Then, to change the subject, I added, "Right now, we're on the fifth floor. The twins will be in a lab on the second floor. We can access the security system from the computers there. Agents Ward and Simmons will probably be somewhere nearby."

"And how do we get to the second floor?" Fitz asked, pulling out from behind Skye, drone controller in hand.

"Stairs," I said immediately, pointing as I started to jog. "This way. We should hurry, it won't take them long to notice something's up."

---

_The boy was fast. He shouted in a language I didn't understand. The Crucible spoke Russian; they taught me, but not the siblings._

_I knew they were brother and sister, when the brother strikes a blow across my jaw — retaliation for throwing his sister against a wall. They're protective of each other, but the brother was more aggressive when provoked, didn't let his sister get too close to me._

_It reminded me of someone. A smile, a laugh. Brown eyes behind glasses._

_This other boy's face comes out of nowhere in my head. I knew him. I struggled to remember his name. I couldn't. It's distracting._

_Distracting enough for the brother to land a punch._

_He was fast. Faster than anything I've seen, anything else here._

_But he was sloppy. They didn't train him to fight. Not like me. His blow knocked me down, but I take him with me. I land on top, pin him to the ground._

_He's only fast when he ran._

---

We make it to the stairwell unhindered. I disabled two more cameras along the way. Fitz leaves behind a drone in the hallway, a "breadcrumb" of sorts to make sure the way was clear when we came back through.

I peered up the stairwell. I could see shadows, hear bootsteps, but nothing rushed. No one knew we were here yet. Giving the signal to Skye and Fitz, I started up the steps, keeping to a crouch to soften my steps.

Another guard on the fourth-floor landing. His back was to me. He turned just as I reached him. His mouth goes open for a shout just as I clamp my hand over it. I grabbed his weapon, jerked it out of his grip before he could fire, and kick out his legs from beneath him. I finished by delivering the butt of his rifle to his face.

The guard goes from standing to unconscious in less than two seconds. It's done entirely in silence. I want to maintain our stealth for as long as possible.

Skye and Fitz just reach the landing to watch me finish him off. I tried to ignore their gaping looks as I started up the next flight of stairs.
They were huddled in a corner again. The room was large, empty, like a gym, but no windows. The scientists were testing the brother's speed - bringing the sister along to keep him complacent.

The boy was now out of breath, exhausted after what seemed like hours of running laps on the track. There are scorch marks on the tarmac, friction burns from his speed. There was a faint smell of ozone in the air. The scientists handed out rations. They don't feed him enough.

The sister was sullen, quiet. She wore a collar, a dog on her leash. I watched as the boy already rail-thin, giving her half of his bread.

She tried to give it back. He insisted with a smile. I look down at my own piece of bread. I lost my appetite a long time ago.

Two guards were making their way down the second-floor landing. They didn't see me, only saw the silver shield and red star as it came charging up the steps. I slammed into both of them at the same time, using the shield to absorb the blow.

Both guards, male and female, hit the steps hard. One tumbled down the steps. The other tried to pick herself back up. I swung my arm. The shield bounced off her head, which hits the wall, and she slumped, unconscious.

"Hey!"

Surprised, I looked up to see two more Crucible agents coming down from the first floor. They gape at me, and for a second, we stare at each other, frozen in shock. I wondered what they thought when they saw me, dressed as I was.

My hand was already going for the pistol. It was too far to engage in physical combat, and I didn't like the angles to try throwing my shield again.

At same time, they reached for their weapons.

I was faster.

A quickdraw. The Night-Night gun fired off two rounds before either agent could bring their weapon to bear. Both drop like a bucket of rocks, crashing down the steps in a clatter of flesh and metal, before landing at a heap in front of the second-floor door.

The scientists were distracted with their work — data, calculators, animated debate with jargon I didn't understand. I wasn't supposed to. I shouldn't be listening.

They didn't even acknowledge me now. They already knew that the assimilation was successful. I was there as a guard. Watching the siblings. Learning the smaller facets of the Crucible's operation.

They didn't even notice when I step away.

When I approached them, the brother and sister shrink away. The brother placed himself between me and the girl. I saw it in his eyes. The fear. He thought I was ordered to hurt them again.

Instead, I stopped, a safe distance. Back stiff, bootsteps heavy. I couldn't look at them directly. It was hard to focus on their faces. Looking too hard reminded me of something I used to be.

The brother stares when I extend my hand, the bread between my fingers.
The girl whispered something in his ear. After a moment of hesitation, the boy took my bread. A slight nod was all the thanks I got.

It's enough. I didn't say anything to them the entire time. I turn on my heel and return to my post as if nothing happened.

Fitz’ drones scouted ahead into the lab. He left two more behind. We hunkered down around his screen. It's nighttime so there are less personnel about. Our presence was still unknown here. It would've been a completely different story had we come during the daytime.

"There seems to be three scientists," Fitz squinted at his screen, his fingers working the controls. "And six guards. And those look like cages —"

A gunshot rang out, then a shout.

Fitz cursed, banged the screen against his knee. "Damn! They took out Sleepy!"

"Let's go!" Skye took us by the shoulders, lifted us up. "Before they see the others and figure out what's going on."

I didn't have to be told twice. Running ahead, I brought up the Night-Night gun, swung around the corner.

A suspicious guard had just stepped out of the lab, alerted by the presence of the drone. He had his gun aloft, but was unconscious before he could fire. I leapt over his body and slid into the lab, ducking under the first counter I saw.

I thought for sure my cover was blown. I kept my shield up, just in case, but no gunfire went off. But nothing happened. I looked up as Skye and Fitz skidded in beside me, keeping low.

Then, from somewhere in the room, a shaky voice called out. "Dave? Is that you? Is everything all right?"

Dave, who I assumed to be the guard I just shot, didn't respond. Slowly, I peered out over the counter, then pulled my head back sharply. One of the scientists had stood up, was peering over the exit we just came through. If he stepped any closer, he'd see the body.

But that wasn't what concerned me.

"The cages are empty," I whispered.

"What?" Fitz demanded, confused.

"The cages," I repeated, trying to level my breathing. Was it just me, or was it getting hot in here? "They're empty. The twins aren't here."

Then a bullet ricochets next to my shoulder.

One day I wake up behind a glass wall. The Baron has placed me in a cell next to the siblings. He was conducting a study on our respective physiologies.

The two eye me warily. They remain mute.

I see it in their faces, though. The girl hates me. The boy is conflicted. I didn't flinch when the girl
threatened me, angry words I didn't know.

Then Savin passed by outside, and slammed the glass with his fist. I jumped, and he walked away, cackling. The girl stopped abruptly at that. I followed her gaze to my arms. I was dressed in thin cotton, most of my arms and legs exposed. The burns stand out, angry red sores and blisters, against my skin. I'd forgotten them until now. Her brows pinch, her anger replaced by something else.

It was then we first speak.

She said something then. It was difficult to understand them. They could barely understand me. But I learned their names: Pietro and Wanda. They tell me they're twins.

I'd never met fraternal twins before.

Skye let off a stream of creative swearing as I raised my shield to block the fire coming from a semi-automatic on the other side of the room. She and Fitz crushed themselves against my back, seeking shelter behind me and the shield.

Up until this point, I had no idea if this shield was really as bullet-proof as Fitz claimed. Real Vibranium. But as it shook in my hands, and flattened bullets piled at my feet, I realized just how thankful I was to have it. Without this shield, all three of us would be Swiss cheese.

There were two exits in the lab. The one we just came from, and the one directly opposite us on the other wall. There, a guard had appeared with his AK-12. I hadn't seen him because I had been distracted with the empty cages. He took one look at us and started firing.

That alerted everyone else in the lab, and suddenly we were trapped. I could hear bullets hitting the other side of the counter I was hiding behind.

"We just lost Happy and Sneezy!" Fitz cried over the hail of gunfire, covering his head with the controller and trying to turn himself into a ball. "What do we do? We're sitting ducks!"

"I'm thinking!" I said, trying to push against the force of the bullets hitting the shield. The guard with the AK was stepping closer, confident that he had us, he'd be right on top of us.

"Wait, I got something!" Skye shouted, and before I could glance over to see what she was doing, something went flying over my head from behind me.

It bounced off the guard's head. He let out a grunt, stumbled back. His stream of gunfire went way over our heads. I ducked, bring up the shield over me and Skye as her grenade dropped to the floor.

Bam!

Noxious black smoke filled the air and the first guard dropped, the AK-12 cracking against the concrete floor. More shouts filled the room as the gas spread. Fitz, Skye, and I covered our faces as we came up from our crouch, darted further into the room.

Not everyone had fallen. There were four more guards standing and one scientist — who had just turned tail to run, only to get an electric cartridge in his back. He went down with a yelp.

I took aim at the closest guard, but he ducked just in time. The cartridge whizzed past uselessly and I cursed, ducking back under my new cover, one of the desks in the room. Fitz and Skye were across the aisle, Fitz desperately trying to man what was left of his drone force while Skye dragged him into safer cover.
"Skye!" I called as another spatter of bullets flattened against my shield. "Get on the mainframe and shut everything down before the entire complex knows we're here!"

"On it!" Skye reached up and pulled a keyboard off the desk overhead, along with a monitor. "I'm going to need five minutes!"

"You have three!" I said, as I reloaded my Night-Night gun, then fired off two more rounds. The first one missed, but the second one caught a guard standing in the far back of the lab. He went down with a shout.

I was placed in that glass box frequently. I didn't fight or struggle when the scientists stick electrodes all over my face and body, when they shock me, when they test my muscles reflexes.

But I spoke to the twins. After being deprived of my voice for so long, only obeying orders, it feels good to hear an echo of my distant, smothered thoughts.

I learned more about the twins. They have lived here for many, many years. They are not ashamed of what they are. Pietro likes music. The scientists sometimes give him an old Walkman when he did well. It only played 80's music, but Pietro knew all the words by heart. It helped keep track of time when he perceived the world faster than everyone else.

Wanda daydreamed, made up stories, better worlds to slip into when this world was too much. She was surrounded by old children toys. The dolls had names, the friends of her past.

She had an old locket. Pietro had an old Polaroid. They kept them hidden, but once they showed me the pictures of their families. How much they loved and missed them.

I wondered, vaguely, if I ever had a family.

Speaking to them pulls up that brown-eyed boy's face, anchored deep in my subconscious. I still couldn't remember his name, but his face brings me happiness. I knew he was from some old life that the Crucible erased. He was joy, kindness, belonging.

Speaking to the twins, fractured memories resurfacing, I almost feel real again.

After a while, I realized I like it. Being studied alongside the twins. I started looking forward to it, only so I can talk to them.

Tired of being pinned down for so long, I decided to take the game to the Crucible's agents.

With three left to go, I liked my chances.

"What the hell are you doing?" Fitz shouted as I suddenly stood, leaping over the desk had previously been my cover.

Using it as a launchpad, I vaulted clear over the next two desks, landing directly on top of the closet Crucible agent. I came down hard, shield first.

It struck him across the shoulder. He fell back, and my boots landed on his chest. His head cracked against the ground. The combined blows, along with my weight, knocked him out. I shot him with my weapon, just to be sure.

Not pausing to give the other KGB agents a chance to respond, I straightened again. One was to my
left, by the cages. The other two were to my right, closer to Fitz and Skye. I couldn't get to one without opening my back to the other.

I thought fast.

Threw the shield at the floor.

It hit at an angle, before streaking off at the lone guard on my left. It nailed him directly in the face, slammed off the wall and cages behind him, before coming back around and knocking the last two in the ear, knocking them over like bowling pins. The shield kept going, hitting the far wall behind me.

I leapt up from my cover again, catching the shield just in time. In one swift move, I cleared the room.

Admiring the shield, I said to myself, "Huh, I could get used to this."

"Got it!" Skye cried, and for two seconds the lights went out.

When they came back on, another Crucible agent had entered the room. I didn't see him in time.

"Look out!" Fitz cried. I didn't even turn my head, just dropped to one knee and raised the shield. Just in time. Two bullets meant for my chest hit the Diuranium. Then a shot behind me. I whirled around, watching the guard drop, only to see Fitz rising to his feet, the Night-Night gun shaking in his hands.

"Nice shot," I said, smiling at him.

"Oh, yeah," Fitz huffed, a little out of breath as he glanced about the room, at the half dozen agents I'd already taken out. He waved a dismissive hand. "Just doin' my part. I'm sure you would've been lost without me. Did you just get lucky with that last throw?"

"'Course not," I said with a smile, adjusting the shield on my arm. "I took Advanced Trig last semester."

"Ah!" Fitz' expression lit up, delighted. "A practical application of mathematics! I knew it! Ward owes me twenty dollars —"

"I know where they are!" Skye scrambled to her feet. "Ward and Simmons! I checked the security feeds, they're directly below us."

"What about the twins?" I asked, all too hopeful. I had no idea where they would be now. Where would the Chairman take them, if not to be locked up here? I wasn't aware of any other containments he had.

"Sorry, didn't see them," Skye could only shrug helplessly. "I didn't have a lot of time. On the bright side, though, all their cameras and communication feeds are down. They still don't know we're here."

"They probably already do," I said under my breath, then pointed back the way we came. "Go find your friends, I'll keep looking for mine. There's something not right about this…"

"What do you mean?" Fitz asked, his eyebrows rising. The last drone he had hovered around his head, buzzing forlornly. "I'd say this is going pretty well, all things considered."

"Yeah, that's the point. This place is almost completely empty," I said, gesturing to the lab. "Usually, this place is packing, even at night. And the security force is lacking. Where are all the extremis
soldiers? They used to have a dozen or more. And I know I didn't take care of all of them getting to London. Where did they go? Why aren't they here?"

"You think it's a trap?" Skye frowned.

"No," I said, but I didn't like the absolution of it. I couldn't be sure, and I didn't trust myself to know. Even now, as new memories kept rising to the surface, I was afraid of stumbling across something I should've seen before. "Maybe. I don't know. It doesn't feel like it, and yet it seems like the Chairman was expecting us, decided to vacate early. The Baron is usually here —"

"The Baron?" Fitz repeated, looking alarmed. "As in, Baron von Strucker?"

"Yeah? You know him?"

Fitz' response was a shudder. "His reputation. He's sadistic, enjoys human experimentation. Thinks himself some sort of visionary. He's been on SHIELD's most wanted list for years, but we could never find him. You're saying he's been operating here this whole time?"

"From what I can remember," I could only shrug. "Sure sounds like him, though."

"Well, he's definitely gone, then," Fitz sighed, his shoulders drooping a little. He just shook his head. "But if you're right, if they knew we were coming, then how did they find out? Who told them? This wasn't even a sanctioned mission."

"Maybe we're predictable," Skye offered. "I mean, Coulson already knew what we wanted to do. I'm sure the Chairman knew SHIELD would come for our agents at some point. And maybe he knew how close Mia was to the twins, how relentless she'd be to get them back. Who knows?"

It was a good point, even if I didn't like it. Predictable? The words made me cringe. I couldn't stand the idea. I wanted to be better than that.

"I'm still looking for them." I said, heading out the other exit. "I'm going upstairs. If I'm not back in ten minutes —"

"We'll come after you." Fitz said, his eyes sharp, like he knew what I was going to say next. Challenging me to contradict him.

I paused, smiled a little. "Try not to get shot."

---

_Fighting Wanda and Pietro gets harder. I didn't want to hurt them. But I didn't have a choice._

_When he was close enough to strike, Pietro whispered to me. My Sokovian was getting better. He told me only to defeat one of them. That way we all live._

_It's almost treason._

_But I didn't care._

---

It wouldn't be until later would I realize how stupid it was of me to split up from the group.

But I was blinded by the urgency of the moment, and the trust of my own memory, as shoddy as it was. Extremis soldiers were the one thing I was terrified of encountering here, but at this point it seemed pretty clear they were no longer at the Crucible.
As I made my way up the first-floor steps, it occurred to me how strange it was to be in the Crucible without seeing Brandt, Savin, or the other Extremis soldiers. They were such a constant element in my memories here that it almost seemed wrong that they were gone. I knew I should be relieved, though. Brandt and Savin were dead. I had nothing to worry about.

The steps were rough going up. The floor shook beneath me. A deep rumble and boom sounded from somewhere inside the bunker, and I raised my shield just in time to cover my head from falling stone and debris.

It nearly toppled me backwards down the steps, but I caught myself in time and pushed onwards.

I took out three more KGB agents on the way up — I was in the middle of reloading the Night-Night gun when I stepped into the first-floor hallway, and came face to face with a stampede of nearly a dozen guards, charging straight for me.

Caught off guard, I raised my shield, ducked my head. I closed my eyes, ready for impact.

It never came.

The agents just ran past me.

I stumbled a little bit, putting too much weight into my forward foot. I turned, watching the agents flee, calling out in terror down the steps behind me.

What the hell was going on?

I shoved past the doors and found myself running down another long hallway. I didn't remember this part very well — maybe I didn't come here very often back when I was still under Crucible control.

As I ran, the hall continued to shudder and shake. Dust and plaster fell from the ceiling. Cracks ruptured up support columns. More distant booms. It sounded like explosions.

There was something about these walls, though. Their white paint. The too-bright lights…

Turning a corner, I spotted a double-wide doorway, and a sign painted next to it. **MASTER OPERATING THEATER.**

I didn't hesitate before bursting in.

The white operating room. The one I woke up in two years ago.

The operating tables were empty. All that remained was a crash cart, a dialysis machine, and an old computer monitor.

"You're too late, Mädchen."

I whirled around. In the observation room, behind the glass, stood Baron von Strucker.

In his hands, he held the Scepter.

---

One day, I remembered New York.

I remembered my name.

Mia.
I remembered the strange, smiling, brown-eyed boy.

Peter.

I remembered ohana.

I clung to these, desperately. I couldn't wait to tell Wanda and Pietro. They listened, enraptured, when I told them of my home.

I missed it.

They told me they miss home, too. Their parents. That they would do anything to get out of here.

They couldn't, though. They've already tried. Failure cost them dearly. Pietro was afraid that he would be separated from his sister forever.

Wanda was sure they'd kill Pietro. That they'd make her do it.

They're too afraid to try again.

Later that night, when I was alone in my cell, attempting to sleep, I realized I was not afraid.

My blood ran cold. Baron von Strucker. Mad scientist. The man who turned me into this. Right here, standing less than ten feet away.

"My, my," the Baron chuckled, red monocle gleaming the light of the Scepter. It cast an odd glow in the room. His voice crackled from an unseen speaker. His eyes flicked up and down my fatigues, and he sneered. "Don't you look...patriotic."

"Where are they?" I demanded, taking a step forward. I didn't know where to look — at the Baron or at the Scepter. "Where is Wanda and Pietro?"

"Who?" the Baron blinked, frowning. Then he laughed. "Oh, you mean the Mutant twins? I never bothered with names; a scientist must never get too attached to his projects, you know."

I lunged forward, slammed my fist into the glass. It cracked, but didn't shatter — it was stronger than I expected.

The Baron seemed greatly amused by my attempt as he set about packing up the Scepter, placing it in a heavy black briefcase lined with foam. "Nice try, Mädchen, but I'm afraid I don't have time to entertain you this evening. I have an appointment and I mustn't be delayed."

As he spoke, I turned on my heel, made for the doors. Only they wouldn't budge when I tried the handle. Heart skipping a beat, I spun around, went for the other set of doors on the opposite end of the room. Locked, too.

This was it. I knew there'd be a trap.

"Tsk, tsk," the Baron said over the intercom. "So impatient. You want to leave so soon? And without saying goodbye to your lovely host?"

"What?" I asked, as the lights in the room went dark. The Baron disappeared from view, and behind me the TV flickered to life. The low buzz of white noise filled the room. I stepped closer, cautious, as a face filled the screen.
The Chairman.

His face was even clearer than it was in my memories. Dark hair, cold green eyes, a clean-shaven face. Sharp cheekbones, square jaw. He didn't look older than fifty. If I hadn't known any better, I'd even say he looked...normal. If I saw him in a crowd, he wouldn't have stood out much at all. He was more human than I expected.

And that made him all the more terrifying.

"Good evening, Amelia," He said, with a small smile. That voice, the soft Russian accent, washed over me with a cloying, deceitful warmth, like the heat from unstable plutonium. He was acting as though this was a friendly chat. As though he hadn't been the cause of every terrible thing in my life. "I had hoped to see you again."

I planned my escape.

It took months.

Despite what everyone said, escaping the Crucible wasn't impossible. I knew how it could be done. The Winter Soldier taught me to be observant — and now I knew the cameras, the controls, the patrol patterns. I had it all committed to memory.

What was left of it.

Sometimes I was lucid enough to remember who I was. Remember the plan. Remember Peter.

Sometimes too lucid. Sometimes I started to resist. Then I had to be reprogrammed. A machine that wasn't functioning correctly, a machine that had become too self-aware.

One time I was stupid. I was caught giving the twins a bit of my food. So, I was locked in a cement cell, with no food and no light for a week. I didn't see Wanda or Pietro for another three.

The Crucible didn't tolerate kindness. It did not tolerate weakness.

So, I had to be smarter.

"You knew I was coming," I said, my voice hoarse. I was having trouble breathing. Exertion, realization, panic. I was stuck in this goddamn room, forced to speak to the Chairman when I could be saving the twins. There was no question that he had been planning this.

"I have eyes everywhere," the Chairman replied with a slight nod, confirming my theory that this wasn't a recording, that we were actually speaking in real time. His head filled most of the screen. I couldn't make out much behind his head. Maybe a pale wall, or a hazy window. No indicator as to where he really was. "$I knew you were attached to the Mutants, before your escape. I'm impressed, actually, that you decided to forsake your goal of reaching home to come back here, of all places, just to save them. You can't buy that kind of loyalty, Amelia. In fact, I'd say I'm almost proud of you. If only you had devoted that loyalty to a worthier cause."

I tried to find any sense of hypocrisy in his face, and found none. "Why buy loyalty when you can steal it?"

"Steal?" The Chairman frowned slightly, looking more curious than angry at the accusation. "$I think loyalty is a small price to pay for the gifts I've given you, Amelia. There are men who would give
more for less. And I never took anything from you that you weren't willing to give me."

I grit my teeth. What did that mean? Was he saying that I was somehow complacent, that I wanted to be a part of this? Unlikely. "I don't believe you."

"Believe what you want, but someday you'll see the truth."

I was scanning the room again, looking for another way out. Could I try the window again? Maybe it would break if I kept striking it.

"You can escape, if you want to," The Chairman said, as if he could read my mind. "I'm sure you're quite capable. I anticipate it. Perhaps you're wondering why I haven't initiated your turncoat protocols yet, for that loyalty you think I've stolen."

The tables rattled as the structure shook around me. My gaze cast about the room again, distracted, but drew back to the Chairman on those last words.

I didn't have to speak. He already knew what I was thinking.

The Chairman smiled. "I've learned that loyalty always comes with sacrifice. And that happens to be self-preservation. You happen to have very little of it when you're under control and you tend to be aimless with no one to command you; Unfortunately, if I were to bring you under at this moment, it would be unlikely you'd pull yourself out of the rubble. I'm sure you can tell already; this place is falling apart. I've asked the Baron to initiate the self-destruct sequence — there will be nothing left when those Capitalist dogs come to scuttle the wreckage."

Well, that explained why those agents were desperate to get the hell out of Dodge. They knew that the Chairman wouldn't hesitate to crush them and anything else to cover his tracks.

"So, you're letting me free," I surmised, the words bitter on my tongue. "So, you can use me again later?"

"Precisely." The Chairman seemed pleased that I figured it out. "Of course, I could always leave you in the command of Von Strucker, but I don't trust anyone who prides themselves on their intelligence. He'd likely steal you for his own purposes than return you to me, and I can't have that. So yes, consider this a small mercy, Amelia. I'm letting you escape. The real question is, though, what will you do with this opportunity?"

He continued without waiting for me to answer. "I was foolish enough to leave the Scepter with Von Strucker, and it seems he's scarpered off with it the first chance he got. You see now why I couldn't trust him with you. You have a chance, now, to stop him. Or," he paused, and even through the screen something sinister glittered in those eyes. "You can save your Mutant friends. I'm afraid you won't have time to do both."

Startled by this, I looked behind me. Indeed, the observation room was empty. The Baron had made his escape while I was distracted.

"And believe me when I say that if the Scepter remains in his hands, then terrible things will happen in the future. Who knows what he'll do with it, where it will end up," The Chairman continued lightly, glanced down to brush invisible dirt off his shoulder. "Arrest him, even, hand him and the Scepter over to SHIELD. I don't mind, truly. Become the unlikely hero, just like your predecessors. What is more important to you, Amelia? The individual, or the community?" He asked me, when I faltered, unable to move. "Saving the world from a mad scientist with the power of the gods in his hands, or two little Mutant children, whose names no one will remember?"
I glared at him, as dust continued to fall, dusting my helmet and shoulders in white powder. Those last words dashed away any doubt I had left.

"Their names are Wanda and Pietro Maximoff," I told him. "Maybe I won't always remember, but you will."

Then I slammed my fist into the TV screen.
Of course, the Chairman didn't tell me exactly where the twins were. Might leave me with just enough time to stop Von Strucker. Couldn't have it too easy for me, right?

The Crucible shook all around me as I tore down the halls, not bothering to check every room as rubble fell. I already had a pretty good idea where Wanda and Pietro would be, what I could remember about this place.

Yeah, I wasn't going to waste my time with Von Strucker. I knew he had the Scepter, and I knew it was bad that he had it — but 1) I came here for Wanda and Pietro and I wasn't leaving without them. And 2) If I caught Von Strucker, that meant the Scepter would end up in SHIELD's possession. And while I liked Skye and Fitz, I didn't trust the organization as a whole. Who knew what they'd do with it. Would they be any better than Von Strucker? It wasn't like SHIELD was known for their transparency.

But I digress. I had a pretty good idea where the twins were.

Cold Storage.

A flicker. A memory.

"Be careful, sweetheart," Savin told me, once. I'd landed a good blow on him during a sparring match, and he had a bloody lip he licked at, sneering. "Don't want to end up in Cold Storage, do you?"

A threat.

"Keep that up," Brandt sneered when I broke programming for the first time. "And the only thing you'll be good for is Cold Storage."

I had heard my name called — one of the other scientists had the same name as me — Amelia. It had been enough to remind what I was. What I had been.

Hearing my name led to resistance, as it usually did. When they told me to obey, I didn't. When they grabbed me, I fought back. The Winter Soldier wasn't there. Brandt was.

She took great pleasure in burning that name out of me again.

Two Crucible agents appeared just as I rounded a corner. I slammed right into them.

For their part, they tried to stop me. Why, who knows. One grabbed my arm. The other elbowed me
in the face. They tried to pull the shield away from me.

They were better off if they had just kept running — I wouldn’t have stopped them.

As I decked the first one across the jaw, I spotted the flick of black coat disappearing through a door ahead. Von Strucker.

I threw my weight into the shield. Crushed one agent between it and the wall behind him. He gasped, winded, dropped to the floor. A kick to the head and he was out.

Words on a screen.

I didn’t know how I got so close to a computer. Why the scientists or security would trust me. But they did.

In retrospect, I’d realize they had no idea I had an affinity for coding. If they had, they wouldn’t have been so careless.

I observed as the lead security officer talked a rookie through the computer mainframe. The room was wide, the far wall covered in what must have been fifty computer monitors of various sizes. Analysts operated on keyboards and switch boards, managing cameras, sensors, gate access. The entire compound could be seen from this one room. This was the fifth time I’d been in here, and now I knew where everything was.

I got close to the monitors. Monochrome, grainy. In the corner was a small bar of text. Camera number. Floor level.

That’s when I saw, for the first time, the words Cold Storage. A dim room filled with mist and large, strange-looking columns. I couldn’t make out what they were before I was called back to my post.

But now I knew. When the Crucible agents spoke of Cold Storage, I thought it was just a moniker for a morgue. Anyone who went there didn’t come back.

It didn’t look like a morgue. But I had a feeling it wasn’t much better.

The last agent put up a stronger fight now that he knew what he was dealing with. I just wanted to tell him to run. But my mind was too busy processing fragmented memories and trying to keep myself alive than to operate any auxiliary functions.

His weapon was out. Fired off a shot. I spun around just in time. A bullet meant for my back bounced off the shield.

He kept firing, because it totally worked the first time. As he emptied his clip, I lowered to protect my legs. Then came the clicking of an empty clip.

The agent swore, fumbling to unload. The empty clip hit the floor at the same time I threw my shield.

It struck him in the chest, sent him back. The shield bounced off the wall and back to me. I caught it, grabbed the gun, bent it into a right angle, and threw it away as I turned and kept running.

The agent, still conscious, didn’t come after me.

The timing was just right.
The Winter Soldier had been sent away on a mission. I didn't know everything, but I knew enough. Libya. Uprisings. Unrest. International support. At least a week of tracking before the target was eliminated. Maybe longer if there was more than one.

I wasn't expecting it. Just one day, I noticed he was gone. I overheard Brandt talking to one of the other Extremis soldiers. She was disappointed she couldn't take part. Extremis soldiers were good at faking suicide bombs.

But a week was a godsend. I only needed a day.

I had never been in Cold Storage. I wouldn't have even known it existed if it wasn't for Savin. If the Extremis soldiers hadn't gotten a kick out of tormenting me.

Guess they were good for something after all.

I found another staircase, threw myself down three steps at a time. There was an elevator, but it wasn't safe. The air was getting thick with dust. I kept going down. Past the fifth floor. Deeper, deeper into the Crucible.

It happened at nighttime.

My room was cement. It was oddly designed, the floorspace maybe twelve-feet square, but the ceiling reaching twenty-feet above my head. It was always cold and drafty. High up, there was a small vent with a tiny spinning fan - too small and too far away for me to reach. The door didn't have a handle on the inside. I could only leave when they wanted me to.

The solution to getting out was surprisingly simple.

All I needed was a piece of tape.

The memories kept flashing across my vision, haphazard and disjointed. I wasn't sure which ones were together or not. A headache pounded behind my temples. Still, I pushed on.

I skidded to a stop on the landing of Sub-Level 10. Unlike before, these doors were locked. I imagined there would be guard postings here, if the guards hadn't abandoned everything in the ensuing destruction. There was no one to stop me from attaching one of Fitz' small mines to the door (I tried to kick it down — too thick, didn't work), before taking cover behind my shield twenty feet away.

BOOM.

Flames and metal shrapnel went everywhere. For a second, all the air was sucked out of my lungs, the explosion eating up all the oxygen in the cramped space. I had been cold before, but now I felt a little crispy. The fire had flash-dried everything.

As soon as the air was clear (mostly), I got back up, and headed inside.

The door operated on an analog system. It swung outward, and the lock was magnetic, activated whenever the latch fell into place. There was no way to hack it.

But so long as the latch didn't fall, then the door wouldn't lock, and would swing open. It was a thick
door, made of reinforced steel — not impossible for me to get through by force, but my plan (what little I could remember at any given point) required stealth. I couldn't go bashing my way out of the Crucible. I'd never make it ten feet.

All I needed to keep the latch from falling was a good piece of duct tape, of which there was plenty to find in the Crucible.

_**Remembering the tape was the hard part.**_

_In the Crucible, my own mind was working against me. I was constantly forgetting things that were non-essential — that is, anything I learned while fully conscious, not completely under Crucible control. I didn't even remember when I figured out the door mechanic to my cell. It had to be days, if not weeks, before I figured it out again._

_One day, I was lucid enough to sneak into a closet, rip off a strip of tape, and stick on the inside of my wrist, hidden under my sleeve._

_I'd later find it, three days later, unable to remember why I had tape on my arm or what it was for._

_It returned to me soon enough. That night, as I was shoved past the door into my cell, I stumbled. Grabbed the door for support. The guard didn't even notice as the black-painted tape covered the latch, and slammed the door shut behind me._

_The magnetic lock made a clicking noise, as it always did. But it was just the fault of the design, unable to tell when the latch was actually extended or not. As far as the guard knew; everything was in working order._

I wasn't sure what to expect in Cold Storage.

I began my search through a series of interconnected rooms, with short, narrow hallways, dimly lit. There were exposed pipes across the walls and ceilings, and my breath visibly clouded in front of me. Frost covered the walls and floors. Icicles formed where leaks had occurred, leaving shivering, dangling icy daggers everywhere.

The floor was so cold that the rubber soles of my boots kept sticking to it. It made noises every time I had to pull away, and I couldn't help but wince each time. Well, this was certainly going to kill any facade of stealth I had now.

Like in the medical bay, there were gurneys here, only these ones were reinforced with heavy straps and manacles. I had the distinct feeling whoever ended up in cold storage did it unwillingly.

It was more stable down here. I only noticed small cracks in the wall from the destruction of the Crucible. Maybe the Chairman wanted this particular floor to last. But why? There was no one down here.

Then I burst into the largest room yet. The temperature dropped at least ten degrees as soon as I entered. Above me, the cold blue lights flickered, fighting to maintain enough heat to conduct electricity in an environment directly adverse to it. About the size of cafeteria, the floor space was covered in rows upon rows of upstanding vessels.

The room I had seen on the security feed.

Each column had its own series of pipes feeding into it. There were periodic releases of freezing gases. They were round, tube-shaped, and stretched from floor to ceiling, and each had one
pneumatic door, just low enough to reach on foot.

I still had no idea what they were.

In each door there was a little glass window, about five inches over my head. Approaching one, I stood on tip-toe, using my hand to clean off the half-inch thick layer of soft ice that had formed on top.

A pair of white, staring eyes met mine.

I yelped, stumbled back. But the eyes didn't follow me. They kept staring ahead, the face behind the glass unmoving.

He was frozen.

That's when I noticed a screen at about waist-height, with data filtering across. Now that my heart had stopped pounding, I stepped back again to read it.

**Experiment: Long-term Cryogenic Hibernation**

**Date:** 3/12/1942

**Test:** 23

**Result:** FAILURE. Patient 23 suffered from asphyxiation four hours after being interred in capsule.

**Conclusion:** Life support systems need retooling. Review oxygen-nitrogen levels in bloodstream of subjects before interring.

I read it over twice, before looking back up at the frozen face. 1942. This man had been trapped, dead, in here for over seventy years. Why did they keep him? As some sort of example?

Well, of course. As a scientist, you don't throw away your experiments. Even failed tests were of value, perhaps even more so than successful ones — they always told you how something could be improved. As that saying goes, Edison discovered a thousand ways how *not* to make a lightbulb, and one way he could.

I doubted Edison would be into something like this, though. I shuddered, backing away, looking down at the dozens of other capsules. I had to make myself move, glance at the reports, the dates. More failures. More deaths.

The Crucible had been looking for ways to successfully engineer cryogenic preservation. Even today, I wasn't sure that was possible.

Maybe this was what would have happened to me, if I had ever failed, ever proven myself too weak for the Crucible. The scientists would just use me as a guinea pig, fodder for their experiments. Whether I lived or died was inconsequential, as long as my existence provided some scientific purpose.

As I continued to my search, I kept glancing at the dates labeled on the capsules. Organized
chronologically, it gave me some idea how this place was set-up. Recent victims would be in the far back of the room. If there were empty capsules, that's where the twins would be.

I had just exited the first row when I tripped over a body.

There was a guard patrol every twenty minutes. I could hear them through the walls.

That night, I crouched, ear against the door, counting down the minutes in my head. Making sure the pattern stayed the same, that this wasn't the one day that routine would be cast aside on an unlucky whim.

I heard them approach down the hall. A set of bootsteps, four guards total. If it came down to it, I could take them out. The guards here were regular humans, remarkable only in their training and who they allied themselves with. Compared to agents like the Extremis or the Winter Soldier, they were hardly a challenge.

But to the key to my escape was silence. Was stealth. Were all the things the Winter Soldier taught me. Know your environment. Know the threats, the weaknesses. Exploit them. Treat everything as a danger to you.

I waited until the patrol's footsteps faded. And then, with a light touch of my fingers, I gently pushed open the door.

It swung silently. I did only an inch at first, just in case there was someone around I wasn't aware of. But there was no one down the hall. I pushed the door open a little farther, glanced in the opposite direction. The hallway was completely empty.

"Damn," I cursed under my breath, turning around to examine what I just tripped on. Judging from the armor, and the thin layer of ice now accumulating on him, this guy looked a lot more recent than the ones in the capsules. It wasn't the cold that killed him, though. The guard's face was covered in blood, from his mouth and nose. Something had attacked him.

I spotted three other bodies as I glanced down the next row. One was slumped against a capsule, the other two sprawled across the floor. Their weapons lying next to them, mangled into useless knots of metal.

I caught the faint whiff of ozone in the air now. Could it be…?

I spun on my heel, looking around. Deciding to risk it, I called out, "Wanda? Pietro? Are you here?"

I didn't hear a reply. Instead, the ground started shaking beneath me, so sudden and so hard that I fell, unbalanced.

The capsules, in their metal and glass structures, groaned and cracked under the stress of structural collapse. A loud pop echoed down the room, followed by a hissing noise - a pipe burst. Then another. A third one. A chorus of small little pops that was preambles to the capsules' glass cracking open, releasing cold, ancient air.

The room was still shaking. I couldn't even stand up straight long enough to move. I'd never been in an earthquake before, but I was starting to get an idea of one.

A support beam fell with an almighty crash. Then, a long, ear-piercing shriek. The crack of concrete breaking. Metal tearing. Gas exploding. A capsule in front of me had been dislodged, snapped from
its supports.

It leaned forward, like a tree cut from its stump. At first, slow and looming. Then gravity caught up, and it dropped with terrifying speed.

Straight on top of me.

---

*I glanced up, to where I knew the security camera was. I'd accounted for that, too.*

*Its red light was blinking, but the aperture didn't shift when I fell into its line of sight. All the cameras were closed circuit, and each floor had its own command center for security. That way someone on floor seven couldn't tamper with cameras on floor three. But I was considered a part of security now. No one batted an eye when I was sent from one end of the Crucible to another. They certainly didn't mind when I was on duty in the same room.*

*The guards had no problems leaving me alone in the room with all those computer monitors when they went on a coffee break. It only took me five minutes to loop the feeds of the evening patrol. Turning off the cameras themselves would be too risky, too noticeable. Nonfunctioning cameras would be quickly interpreted as sabotage. Looped feeds take a while to notice. Maybe it's a glitch. Maybe you're just tired. The long intervals between patrols make it even harder to tell.*

*And that's what I needed. Time.*

*With only the tiniest of smiles, I slipped out of my cell.*

*For the first time in months, I was where I wasn't supposed to be.*

---

The giant capsule came rushing down on me.

Unable to get on my feet, I threw myself forward and rolled out of the way. The capsule crashed behind me, the impact making the floor jump and sending me into the air. I landed on threes, my right arm raised with the shield, protecting me from a section of pipes that dropped from the ceiling.

The room, once before almost deathly quiet, was now pandemonium as the ultimately delicate design of the cryogenic capsules shattered and fell under the Crucible's self-destruction.

And it only got colder. The pipes that fell on me leaked a white gas that froze everything it touched. The Vibranium shield had become so cold that I could feel it through my gloves. When I stood up, I found myself stuck — the shield had frozen to the pipes. Dammit!

With one good heave, I wrenched away, ice shattering. Thankfully, the shield didn't. Metal usually became very brittle when cold, but Vibranium had proven an exception.

Realizing that if I didn't get out of here now, I'd turn into a human popsicle myself, I charged ahead, trying to stay upright as best as I could, leaping over another collapsed capsule. Another one fell, and I had just enough time to raise my shield before it landed, forcing me against the side wall.

The capsule left a long gouge in the cement, but it held, and debris rained over my head. But I kept pushing forward, slipping out underneath in a stream of curses. That would've hurt a lot worse if I hadn't been wearing a helmet.

I had reached the back end of the room in seconds. As was before, there was no one here. No one alive, anyways.
Breathing hard, getting colder and more desperate by the second, I called out, "Wanda! Pietro!"

But it became clear to me that they weren't here. The last of the capsules were empty, or were too old. If they weren't in Cold Storage, then they had to be nearby.

Heart pounding, I kept moving. I had to find them before it was too late.

My cell was only on the seventh floor, two floors away from escape.

I'd only tampered with the Floor Seven cameras. After that, I was on my own. I already knew all the camera locations, of course. I'd memorized the guard patterns. And the one person I feared the most — the Winter Soldier — wasn't even here. Honestly, the odds could never be better.

I had just risen to my feet, had walked not twenty feet from my cell towards the stairwell, when something occurred to me.

I'd forgotten something.

But what?

That's when I spotted a small archway to my left. Aha!

I scrambled out of the capsule room just in time. The mantle over the side exit was already crumbling as I passed under. It crashed down on my heels, picking up dust and sending a current of cold air after me.

Thanks to my momentum, I hit the wall on the other side. The walls were still shaking. I took quick stock of the area before continuing. A short hallway stretched out ahead of me. A wall at my back. There was only one direction to head in.

Taking a second to catch my breath, I shook myself over. The floor started to rupture at my feet, and I ran.

No, not what. Who.

Wanda and Pietro.

The realization that I'd forgotten such a crucial part of my plan was almost devastating. I had operated this far without realizing I needed to backtrack to get the Maximoff twins out as well.

I didn't know how to do it. I mean, I knew the layout of the Crucible like the back of my hand. But the lab where Wanda and Pietro were located had stronger security than where I was. Escaping with the twins would be far more noticeable than if I just left on my own.

My odds were dwindling by the second. No plan ever survived first contact. Something was bound to go wrong. Sooner or later, someone would notice the escape attempt, and I doubt I'd be lucky enough for it to happen after I'd already escaped. I had only once chance at this. Going back for the twins might mean complete failure.

It might mean I'd end up in Cold Storage. Forever.

I hesitated, unable to move, unable to decide. Two halves fighting for dominance. The cold agent determined to survive, who only functioned through pure efficiency, no mercy. Going back for the
twins was too big a risk. I couldn't let sentimentality get in the way of freedom.

The other half, the real me, refused to abandon them. Not after everything we'd been through together. Not after all the pain, the torment. There were moments here in the Crucible that I wouldn't have survived had it not been for them. They were the last shred of humanity in the Crucible. The only good to be found here.

If it was Peter, I'd go back for him in a second. Not even the Crucible agent inside of me could fight against that.

Wanda and Pietro were no different.

They were my family.

I turned around, away from the stairways, away from a direct exit. I headed deeper into the Crucible.

I found myself in a laboratory.

It was already in disarray. Shattered glass and unknown liquids covered the floor. Hanging wires swung from the ceiling, tables up-ended, chairs fallen over, shattered lights flickering and petri dishes scattered everywhere. Half the ceiling had fallen, revealing the floor above. The hot steam from broken pipes was a welcome, if slightly uncomfortable change to being in Cold Storage, but I knew I wasn't safe. Half the lights were out. I could barely see, and the fog of steam wasn't helping. And the noise only continued. I couldn't hear my own heartbeat.

Taking care to pick my way across knee-high debris, and praying that Wanda and Pietro hadn't ended up underneath, I navigated the lab. It was much smaller than Cold Storage maybe only twenty feet across. I found another guard, caught under a beam. Unlike the others, his death looked like an accident. It occurred to me that I had no idea how many had been here to escort the twins. The Crucible regarded them as incredibly dangerous. Would they really only send five guards to watch them?

Well, they were stupid enough to escape the first time, so it was hard to tell.

I bumped into a cart, which rolled away. I caught it, then recoiled — not a cart, but an operating table, with thick leather straps to hold down whoever was unfortunate enough to end up on it.

That's when I heard a muffled grunt, somewhere ahead. Heart skipping a beat, I raised my shield, dropped back on one foot, and slowed my pace. Someone was here. A guard? It sounded male. Or maybe it was just the pipes. Some machine in here was broken, making all kinds of sounds. In the heat of the moment, it wouldn't be unreasonable to mistake a mechanical noise for a human one.

I had to squint through the dark fog to see anything. I could barely make out what was ahead of me. Something flickered in the shadows. A creak of metal, an intake of breath. I paused.

Should I call out again? No. If it's a Crucible guard, then I'd want the element of surprise.

The dark silhouettes of two operating tables appeared. I drew closer. Each had an occupant. "Wanda! Pietro!"

Their heads snapped in my direction. Eyes wide, jaws working, but unable to speak through the gags in their mouths. Quickly lowering my shield, I went to their sides. The twins were strapped to either table, restraining collars on. Wanda already had an IV drip in her arm, but the pole had fallen over
and ripped the tubing out. Her arm bled but she was unable to staunch it, wrists and ankles restricted. She looked furious.

Pietro's bullet wound had received care, stitched and bandaged from what I could tell — not easy, since he was struggling so hard I was afraid he was going to pull those stitches free. I put a placating hand on his shoulder, saying, "Hey, take it easy! I'll get you out of here, just give me a moment."

I removed their gags and the twins spent a minute spitting and wetting their tongues. Each leather strap had buckles to lock it in place. No time to undo that all, I whipped out my knife and just sliced through the weakest part of the leather. As soon as Pietro's arm was free, he was already working on the other straps as I finished with his leg, and then onto Wanda.

"Don't worry about those, get her collar," Pietro told me, already sliding off the table. I didn't argue with him, and Wanda became very still as I started to finagle with the lock. This was a different design than the last used on them, so I took my time to make sure I didn't make a mistake.

"I didn't think you'd come for us," Wanda said, her voice raspy. Pietro was already through her wrists and she got me in a sudden hug, one arm stiffer from her injury. "What are you doing here? I thought you escaped!"

"I-I did get away," I said, choking a little in Wanda's grip. I was so stunned that it took me a moment to hug her back. "But I came back for you."

"What?" Pietro looked astounded. "Why?"

"Do you remember when you asked me about what ohana meant?" I said. "It doesn't just mean family. It means nobody gets left behind. Or forgotten."

I got something right. There came a small click as Wanda's collar undid itself, and fell away. The collar dropped with a heavy clunk, giving a loud shrill as I set off an alarm, before crushing it beneath my heel. I wasn't worried about the alert; no one was coming for us anyways.

"W-we are family?" At that, Pietro smiled, and I opened an arm so he'd join the hug as well, and ruffled his hair when he did.

"You fool," Wanda said into my shoulder. Despite the words, her voice shook with tears. "I knew you would come back for us. You shouldn't have, but I knew. Always sentimental."

"And now look who's crying," I teased. Pulling away from them, I peered at Pietro's metal collar, frowning. "Here, let me get that off you..."

"But how?" Pietro asked, and both of them withdrew. They shared a curious look, as if it were just now dawning on them. "You couldn't have come all the way back here by yourself?"

"No, I didn't," I said, and the sweetness of the moment faded when I realized that I couldn't take them back with me. I stuffed down the new bitterness and focused on Pietro's collar; a quick clench of my hand and I broke the locking mechanism, the weakest point of the design. "I came here with SHIELD. I agreed to help them, but I don't trust them. If you end up with them, you'll never get away. They'll think you're too dangerous. So that's why you have to go, now."

"Go?" Wanda frowned, rubbing her sore neck. "Go where?"

"Anywhere. Just not with me." I could only give them a sad shrug. Finally, I got Pietro's collar free, too, jerking it sharply. Pietro winced at the rugged attempt triggered the shock treatment, but there was no time to be delicate. "I'm sorry. I know we agreed to go to America, but we can't anymore."
SHIELD's onto me now. Because I did this, they'll always be following me. I don't know what will happen to me when I get back. But I know you two can still get away, can still be free. They don't know who you are. I promise, I'll never tell them."

"Thank you. But it's not fair, we can't just leave you —" Pietro started, but I held up my hand.

"It's fine, Pietro, I know what I did when I made my choice," I tried to give him a reassuring smile. "If it's any consolation, SHIELD's loads better than the Crucible. There are good people working for them. Those people I can trust. Maybe. But I know you'd hate it."

"Is that why you're dressed like a clown?" Wanda asked, tilting her head.

I laughed dryly. Her bluntness never got old. "Uh, yeah. It's one-time only. We decided that if we came here, acting like heroes, we might as well look the part."

"Well, I think it suits you," Pietro said with a grin, earning an elbow in the side from Wanda. "Ow, what?"

Wanda just rolled her eyes and spoke to me instead. "So, what does this mean? Will we ever see you again?"

My arms hung limply at my sides. "I don't know. Maybe. I hope so. It won't be the same, though. SHIELD's already been watching me. Maybe others, too. I can't make a phone call without someone noticing."

"Don't worry, we'll think of something," Pietro said, and I realized with a sudden pang how much I was going to miss that unerring bravado of his. I wasn't going to anywhere near as unstoppable as I had with Pietro next to me. "Maybe this will be good, you know? Me and Wanda can go home again."

"You want to go back to Novi Grad?" I asked, glancing between the two of them uncertainly.

"Why not?" Wanda said with a shrug. "We've seen enough of your world to know what freedom truly is. Our home is still in turmoil, and it needs our help. We were created to destroy, but I know we can fix things, too."

The walls shook around us, and I stumbled, falling against a column. Still, I managed to smile. "That sounds great, Wanda. I think now that the Crucible's gone, Sokovia's going to need all the help it can get."

In the distance, I heard a voice call out. I turned my head to Wanda and Pietro. "You should go now, before SHIELD catches up to me."

I tried not to look him in the eye when Pietro hugged me. I hugged back, grip tight. I'd never forget the worn texture of his jacket, or the funny itch of his hair in my face. I was already doing my best not to cry myself when he told me, "We will see each other again. I know we will."

"Is that a promise?" I asked, my smirk trembling.

"It is fate," Pietro pulled back with a grin, giving me an errant salute as he and Wanda started to retreat towards a back door. "Count me on this."

The last thing I saw was Wanda's final wave, and her call, "We won't forget you."

Then a flash of silver.
They were gone.

Wanda and Pietro were surprised when they saw me.

The good thing about the middle of the night meant that there were no scientists in the lab. It had taken me thirty minutes to reach them — thirty excruciating minutes of careful steps, of dodging corners, hiding from patrols, narrowly avoiding an encounter with Savin. Although I had no fear of the Winter Soldier, the Extremis agents would still be a nightmare if I ran into them.

At least I could run away.

There was no way to enter the lab unnoticed. I took out the entrance guard with a chokehold, covering his mouth to hide the sound. Then I slipped in, took out the second door guard while his back was to me. A third guard was coming down the aisle of computers. I had crouched down behind a desk, struck out my leg, took him down before he realized I was there.

The thump of his body alerted Wanda and Pietro that someone else was here. They turned around in their glass cages, piercing eyes squinting into the suddenly empty room.

Then my head appeared over a computer monitor. Both of their faces split into grins.

"Amelia!" Wanda and Pietro said in unison, exchanging bewildered looks with each other.

I gave them a short wave, deciding not to speak. Not just for the sake of stealth, but because speech was still difficult for me, even in a lucid state. I wasn't sure when it would get better. If it would get better.

But computers still made sense to me. Waking up the monitor before me, it was easy to access the controls, open the doors to the twin's cages. As they tumbled out, a little weak-kneed, I went a step further and entered the security mainframe. A scientist's computer wasn't supposed to do that, but that didn't stop me.

Knowing time was short, and that unconscious guards would mean a quicker discovery, I decided to forgo a bit of secrecy and disabled all the cameras I could access. Someone may have already noticed that the twin's enclosure had been opened. Better they had no idea where we were heading.

"Is this it?" Pietro asked as they joined me at the back of the room. "Are we really leaving now?"

I could only nod.

Wanda said, "You should have given us a warning! We would've been prepared."

My apology was a hoarse collection of words. Wanda's brow pinched in worry. I wondered what she saw when she looked into my head. Could she see how hard I was struggling to remain lucid? How I was constantly fighting my programming, just trying to stay on my feet.

When I straightened up, finished with the computer, I wobbled on my feet. Pietro steadied me with a hand on my shoulder. "Amelia, are you okay? Your nose is bleeding."

I touched a hand to my face. My head was pounding. Memories were shifting all over the place. For a second, I forgot why I was standing here.

I figured it out pretty quick. My programming was trying to shut me down. My active rebellion was forcing it to stop me by any means necessary. I didn't know what's what Von Strucker had done to
me. I didn't how far it extended. Could my own body kill me before I ever got outside?

There was no time to waste. To Wanda and Pietro, I said, "We leave now. Follow me."

"Mia?" I heard a voice call, and turned around to see Skye and an unfamiliar man burst into the room. They had to squint through the fog, but they spotted me all the same. "Mia!"

Skye grinned, waved as she stepped over. "God, we thought we lost you! I thought you might've gotten iced in Cold Storage."

"No, I'm fine," I said, frowning at the man behind her. Tall, with dark hair and a square jaw, I immediately pegged him for a SHIELD agent. "Are you...Ward?"

He gave me a short nod. His face was bruised, and there was a bad cut across his nose. He wore what was left of a suit, sans jacket, shirt sleeves rolled up. He scanned the room, a pistol in hand. "Agent Ward, in service to SHIELD. You must be the super soldier kid Skye's been blabbing about."

"I wasn't blabbing," Skye retorted, annoyed, before tripping over the feet of the dead guard. When she realized what it was, she jumped back. "Oh, shit!"

"What the hell happened here?" Ward asked when he saw the body.

"Wasn't me," I said immediately. "I followed the twins down here, but it looks like they escaped on their own. Th-they're long gone."

"You never saw them?" Skye asked, and when I shook my head she gave me a sympathetic look. She probably mistook the pain of saying good-bye as having missed Wanda and Pietro entirely. "Sorry, Mia. Hopefully they got out all right."

"You sure you didn't see anything?" Ward asked, doubtful. "I mean, you haven't checked the whole floor, have you?"

"No, but I don't think —" I raised the shield to block falling debris as the ceiling collapsed further overhead. "— We have the time. This whole place is coming down, we need to get out as fast as possible."

"I'm with Mia on this one," Skye said.

Ward rolled his eyes, muttering under his breath, "Of course you are. No one ever listens to me."

"Cold Storage is completely wrecked, though," Skye told me. "There's no way we're getting back out the same way we came in."

"It's fine, I know another way," I said, and lead them out the same back door Wanda and Pietro left in. They must be halfway to Novi Grad by now.

Sneaking around was much easier on my own.

Wanda and Pietro had no notion of it. They were never taught, and I had to guide them carefully back the way we came. It was a bit faster now that we didn't have cameras to worry about, but guards were still a problem. Each had a radio on them. A single push of the button would send out a compound-wide alert. All entrances and exits would be sealed.
We did it, though. We had to. We'd come too far, suffered too much not to see it through now.

The closer we got the door with the flaking green paint, the worse my headache got. My nose hadn't stopped bleeding. It was dripping down onto my white shirt. We were all wearing thin cotton clothes; it wouldn't be enough for the eternal winter outside the Crucible.

But it wasn't me I was worried about. Training with the Winter Soldier, I (and the other scientists) discovered that I was nearly immune to low temperatures. Was it natural, or had I just grown a tolerance? No one really knew. What I did know was that Wanda and Pietro were unlikely to be as lucky as me.

When we got out, we'd have to be fast. We'd have to find shelter soon. And food. And build a fire. And —

This line of thought distracted me. It was worse with the pain in my head. Enough that I didn't notice the figure appearing out of the corner of my eye, and only realized what it was a second too late.

A shout went up. "Hey! Stop right there!"

Before I could react, Wanda had sent a fiery burst of energy at the guard. I had taken off her power-inhibitor collar. Pietro told me to free her first. Was still working on his as we worked our way out.

The guard slammed against the wall. Slumped to the ground. But it was too late. He had already reached his radio receiver.

The halls erupted with the noise of sirens.

"Fitz and Gemma are waiting for us outside!" Ward reported as we dashed up a narrow flight of steps.

"We're almost there!" I called back.

These were the maintenance pathways that ran along the edges of the Crucible compound. Thin, economical, forcing us to move single-file. It was inefficient but at least the area was a little more stable.

For now.

We were running full speed. I was in front, with a great lead. I didn't worry too much about leaving Ward and Skye behind. Although they weren't as fast, they weren't being slowed down by anything.

Still, I probably should've stayed closer to them.

The end of this maintenance hall ended in block. Rubble had fallen, forcing us to turn right into a larger room. An armory. Benches and cabinets lined the room. Many had tipped over or broken. Guns, weapons, ammunition littered the floor. I skidded, nearly tripped on a spilled box of cartridges.

But that wasn't what made me stop.

The floor was shaking again.

"Shit!" Ward called.

I just turned around in time to see Ward and Skye, still in the hallway outside the door. Ward grabbed Skye's shoulders, yanked her back before the ceiling could crush her. Rock and broken
wood came crashing down, blocking the only way in.

"Skye! Ward!" I ran back, heart pounding in my throat. "Are you okay?"

"Fine!" came Skye's response, muffled through the rocks. I grabbed a hunk pulled it away. It wasn't too heavy, but there was just so much, and more kept falling. I heard her cough. "We're fine! We just — can't get through! Maybe there's another way around?"

"No time!" Ward replied, and I heard a grunt, followed by a crunch of rocks. "We can dig our way through!"

I liked the idea enough not to suggest another one. Sure, I knew other routes they could take, but the detours were too long, and I had no way to know if they were still accessible or not. Getting through this rock, with three people (one with super strength) was the best option given the circumstances.

But I hadn't accounted for the possibility that we weren't the last ones left in the Crucible.

I had just tossed aside another hunk of debris when I heard something behind me.

Approaching footsteps.

My blood went cold. I recognized them immediately.

Slowly, I turned around. In front of me, standing in the center of the room, was the Winter Soldier.
**MAXIMOFF, PIETRO**

**TITLE:** Fugitive Mutant

**HANDLE:** Quicksilver

**STATUS:** Active, Hostile

**THREAT LEVEL:** 9 [ENGAGE WITH CAUTION]

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DOB:</th>
<th>March 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AGE:</td>
<td>19 y/o</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NATIONALITY:</td>
<td>Sokovian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SEX:</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HAIR/EYE COLOR:</td>
<td>Blond (s)creamed, blue</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HEIGHT/WEIGHT:</td>
<td>6'4&quot;, 180 lbs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**AFFILIATED WITH:**
- Baron Von Strucker
- The Chairman
- P阀ic Fletcher [CONTROVERSY]

**KNOWN RELATIVES:**
- Korra Maximoff [Teen Sister/Active]
- Magda Maximoff [Mother/Deceased]
- Erik Lensherr [Father/Unknown]

**ABILITIES:**
- Superhuman Speed, Perception, Reflexes, Metabolism
- Accelerated Healing Factor
- Bio-Electric Slipstream
- Impervious to friction, kinetic impacts at high speeds

**SKILLS:**
- Fluent in Sokovian, English

**TEMPERAMENT:**
- Sarcastic
- Playful
- Distrustful
- Arrogant
- Irritative
- Vengeful

**NOTES:**
- Older than Wanda by 12 min.
- Known to steal
- Possibly child of Mutant Extremist Magneto (!!!)
Chapter End Notes

Can I still say this story has a moral theme, even if it’s literally just Lilo & Stitch? lol
Chapter Thirty-One

Chapter Summary

The Escape // The Epilogues

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EcT3nPNQVtE

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-One

✮

"Run!" Pietro cried, before I could finish breaking the electronic lock on his collar. I couldn't do both at the same time. But he shoved me forward, saying, "Go! Just run!"

In no state to argue, I obeyed.

All notions of secrecy gone, the three of us tore down the corridor, knocking aside a lonely scientist who just happened to be in the way. Behind us, I heard voices rise up. The Crucible's security force was mobilizing. The entire compound was on full alert.

Banging. Not gunshots, but doors. Slamming down, locking into place. Ahead of us, the double doors to the stairwell swung closed. Four guards rushed into place directly in front of them.

Wanda once again solved the problem. I could see why she was the most feared project of Von Strucker's. Her powers, her strength and her rage, were unmatched.

The quad of men didn't stand a chance when she raised her hands, contorted her fingers. All four bodies lifted into the air. She swung her arms crossed, then down. The four guards mimicked the motion, smashed into each other, then down into the floor, leaving a small crater beneath.

We leaped over them. Wanda blasted the doors off their hinges. We scrambled up the steps as bullets danced at our feet.

The Winter Soldier tilted his chin down. Our eyes met. I couldn't breathe.

I had known it had been a possibility. That he would be here. But I hadn't fully prepared myself. In fact, it had completely escaped my mind as soon as I had stepped out of the quinjet. I had been so focused on Wanda and Pietro I had completely forgotten the larger threat at hand.

And now here he stood, while I was less than a hundred yards from freedom.

He didn't move. Still about fifteen feet away, the Winter Soldier stood between me and the only other door out. Slung across his back was that long sniper rifle. Had he just picked it up here? He wouldn't
need it in such close quarters.

Instinctively, I brought my shield to bear, ready for a fight. My body was sore. My head still flashed with memories. I knew there was no way I could survive another encounter with him. But what choice did I have?

---


Thunder of blood. Thunder of gunshots, of footsteps, of desperate escape.

My lungs burned. Face warm. Head light. The pain still throbbed, but I forced myself to keep going, even when I stumbled, even when I fell.

Pietro, behind me, hardly slowed as he bent down, grabbed my arm, and practically dragged me back to my feet.

We kept going.

"Mia?" Skye called out behind me. The shock that I wasn't alone almost unbalanced me. Skye and Ward had no idea what danger waited for them on the other side. I wanted to open my mouth, to tell them to stop clearing the door. If they did, then there would be nothing to keep the Winter Soldier from killing them, too.

I had been lucky before. Escaping the Crucible the first time only worked because the Winter Soldier wasn't there. Now, I knew he'd never let us get out alive.

Had the Chairman lied? Maybe he just wanted to see how far I got before the Winter Soldier caught me.

But I couldn't speak. My jaw was clenched shut. A part of me was ready to fight, but the rest was too afraid to move.

I didn't tear my eyes off of the Winter Soldier for one second. At any moment, he would strike.

...But he never did.

Five infinitely long, tortuous seconds passed. Only my ragged breathing filled the room. The Winter Soldier continued to watch me in complete silence. What was he doing? What was he thinking?

I couldn't read his expression. A mask covered the lower half of his face again. All I could make out was a tiny flicker in those dead eyes.

And then, while I stood there frozen like a statue, the Winter Soldier turned on his heel.

And simply walked out of the room.

---

Closer. So close.

Fifth floor. Two hundred meters. Bare feet slapping against concrete. Crucible agents sent flying in red waves. Pietro cursing as he twisted his neck in the collar.

Couldn't slow down. No time. No time.
A bright bolt of pain flashed through my head. Almost knocked me down again. I heard Brandt's voice somewhere behind me. Ordering me to stop. Someone shouting the protocol.

Extremis soldiers, closing in.

I was still standing there, unable to blink, jaw gaping several moments later, when the rock behind me crumbled in a sudden burst, and Ward fell through, having just busted in with his shoulder. I spun around, caught off guard. I'd completely forgotten they were here.

"Hey, man, what's the big deal?" Skye asked, following, sounding supremely annoyed. "Why didn't you help out?"

"You didn't see him?" I demanded, completely breathless although I hadn't moved for what felt like an eternity.

"See who?" Ward frowned, looking around, already reaching for his gun. At least he understood there had been a threat.

But his question, and Skye's confused face, told me they hadn't. "Him! The Winter Soldier! He was standing right there!"

"Whoa, seriously?" Skye did a double take, her eyes focusing on the spot I pointed to. "You mean the same guy you fought on the bridge?"

"Yes, him! He was here!"

"Wait, what the hell are you two talking about?" Ward asked, glancing between us with an expression of rising alarm. "Did you say the Winter Soldier? I thought he was just a SHIELD myth to scare stupid newbies."

"He's real," I urged, and I hated the whine that had entered my voice. Even Skye was starting to look doubtful. Of course, I couldn't prove it. It wasn't like the Winter Soldier left any evidence behind. He never did. "I swear to you, he's here. He was right here. Looking right at me."

Ward frowned slightly, squinted at me. "And he, what, didn't kill you?"

"N-no," I said, my heart sinking with each passing second. "No, he just… walked out."

"Uh-huh." I could see the skepticism in Ward's face.

"Winter Soldier or not, I think it's high time we get the hell out of here," Skye said, thankfully changing the subject even though I was left feeling utterly bereft and confused. "Come on!"

Great. I was really starting to hate being the single eyewitness to the most terrifying man in existence.

"I'm telling you, he's real!" I called as I ran up the steps after the SHIELD agents.

"If you think I'm gonna chase after ghost stories," Ward replied as followed Skye. "You better think again!"

It took me a second to join them. I was still reeling.

Ward had a point. Why hadn't the Winter Soldier attacked me?
Savin came out of nowhere.

For once, I saw him first.

I shot forward, darted in front of Pietro — intercepted Savin before he could grab him. Lowered my head, raised my arm and hunched my shoulder. Slammed right into Savin.

He might be bigger. But I was stronger.

I knocked Savin off his feet. He fell behind us with a startled grunt. My shoulder singed from the contact.

We turned a corner. The long hallway. The door with the green-flaked paint at the very end.

Almost there.

One problem. On either side of the hall were a squad of guards, weapons raised.

There wasn't time to figure out what the Winter Soldier was doing here. What his orders were.

The exit on the fifth floor was still open. Fitz was huddled by the door. On the floor next to him was a skinny woman with light brown hair. Her left leg extended out in front of her, a makeshift splint around her ankle.

"Simmons' ankle is broken, she won't be able to run!" Fitz called as we ran towards them. The destruction of the base had become so loud that he had to shout to be heard.

"It's fine! We'll take her together!" Ward replied, bending down to help Simmons up. Fitz took her other side. "Let's go!"

Wanda didn't even hesitate.

A flick of her finger, and the men dropped to their knees, clutching their heads in madness.

Pietro was still struggling with his collar. Not only did it prevent him from using super speed, it was designed to give electric shocks when out of bounds. It was rigged to explode if tampered with. But clearly Pietro had lost all care, all patience now that everything had gone to hell.

The green door was right in front of us. Thirty meters. Twenty. Ten.

Then white, white snow.

We were free.

But it wasn't over yet.

If I thought making it back to the quinjet would be the easy part, I was wrong.

Skye led the way out the door into the mountain beyond. Fitz, Ward, and Simmons between them after her. Me carrying the rear.

I didn't see them at first. The forest directly surrounding the bunker exit was just as dark and quiet as we left it.
I noticed that running the first couple dozen feet was surprisingly easy despite the snow. Then I realized it was already packed down — by the dozens of footprints by the escaping agents.

It occurred to me, a second later, that they would still be here.

You see, in the destruction of the Crucible, the KGB made their escape. Now, they were outside.

I dug my heels in as realization struck. "Wait!" I called to the SHIELD agents ahead of me.

At the same time, a tree exploded next to Fitz.

Trees. Black, ghostly columns against a white floor, a gray sky.

Stretching out into infinity.

We darted weaved around the trunks, darting to and fro, breaking line of sight, making it impossible for any agent behind us to get a good shot. Bark and wood flew everywhere, shrapnel from missed marks.

Bullets whistled past my head.

I saw them emerging from the line of trees, black forms materializing like clones duplicating from shadows.

I ducked down, raised my shield, and leapt over to Simmons, who'd been dropped by Fitz, who was knocked back by the explosion, and Ward, who was now giving cover fire to keep the enemy at bay.

"Oh, hello," Simmons said, breathless but still managing to smile at me. It was at odds with the sudden onslaught of gunfire around us. "I don't believe we've met. Gemma Simmons, SHIELD scientist, at your service."

"Uh, hi," I looked back at her, unsure what to say. Wincing slightly as a round meant for her hit the shield, I said, "Mia. Super soldier. Nice to meet you."

"We have to keep moving!" Ward called between gunshots. He was only about five feet ahead, stumbling in the thick, uneven snow. He had already gotten Fitz back to his feet (Fitz now bleeding from a cut at his hairline and looking a little woozy), while Skye had taken cover behind a large pine, covering her head and screaming at the same time. "Skye, get your head in the game!"

"Okay, okay!" Skye cried, eyes a little wet as she joined Ward, scrambling on her hands and knees for a moment before reaching to her feet.

"A super soldier, did you say?" Simmons gasped as another tree exploded to the left. It came crashing down in a rush of wood and branches. Over the noise she shouted, "Oh, how marvelous!"

"Yeah, its super exciting!" I said through gritted teeth, taking Simmons by the arm and helping her up as we moved forward. "Every other day I'm running for my life!"

There was only one goal. Escape.

The world stretched out before me in every direction. A white, endless expanse, filled with the gnarled, emaciated sentinels of dead wood. Where could we go? Where should we go?
I glanced over my shoulder. Saw the severe façade, blue-grey stone of the Crucible fortress soaring above the green pines and craggy peaks.

Anywhere. Anywhere but here.

The ground exploded everywhere we went. Mines? Grenades? I didn’t have the time to absorb it all. The black smoke scattered us further. I could hear Brandt, Savin, the others close on our heels.

Shouting, screaming.

A burst of red at the edge of my vision.

I turned my head just in time to see an Extremis soldier sent into the air by Wanda’s hand. She spun in the air, pale dress whipping around her legs, as she raised her hands, contorted her fingers.

Trees came down. I saw Savin’s face, a look of shock, before he was crushed beneath timber.

Our trail was lost in a sea of scattered footprints from dozens of other agents. We were no longer in neutral territory, but running straight through enemy lines.

KGB were everywhere. Swarming in from all directions. The world was a blur as I ran, half-carrying Simmons, keeping up my shield to protect her.

I wasn’t even sure if we were heading the right way. But Skye and Fitz seemed to know where they were going.

Above us, the moon still shone, turning the world a midnight blue. Flashes like lightning scattered all around, turning the world into day for brief, intermittent moments. Everything shifted in strobing lights. One second Ward was right in front of me. Next, he was twenty feet ahead.

I struggled to keep up with Simmons. The worst thing that could happen right now is if we got lost.

It was chaos. It was a warzone.

Ice burned my feet.

I was running so fast, it felt like I was flying.

It was the closest to freedom I had ever felt.

I jumped over a fallen tree. A bullet whistled through the air next to me. In midair, it ripped through my shirt, an inch from my skin, before exiting and burrowing into a tree in front of me.

I landed on the other side. I kept going.

A shout to my left. I turned my head, just in time to see Pietro fall.

Carrying both Simmons and the shield meant I couldn't use the Night-Night pistol.

That turned into a problem when Simmons tripped again. We both fell. The snow softened our fall, but slowed our rise. As I scrambled to my feet, an explosion behind us distracted me.

I looked up, just in time to a KGB agent approaching us, silhouetted against the flames. He was
shouting something.

Only too late did I realize what it was.

"Бунтарь!" Buntar.

The trigger phrase.

---

I pivoted on my heel, made a ninety-degree turn.

Leapt over a KGB agent as he fell into the snow. Skidded to Pietro's side. I thought he might've been shot, but no, he'd only tripped. But he was struggling against his collar.

"Amelia!" I heard my name called. Eyes wide, I looked up from Pietro, saw Brandt coming straight for me. Her eyes molten lava, her shark-tooth smile vicious.

I could still run. But then she'd have Pietro.

There was no time. No time to be delicate.

"Amelia, what are you — no, wait!" Pietro flinched as I wrapped my hand around the side of his collar and with one good yank — tore it off.

Metal bent easily under my grip. Circuitry and wire ripped apart like silly string. I felt a sharp electric jolt, but it was too late. Pietro was already free.

He paused for only a moment, feeling his now-bare neck, a red mark where the collar used to be. Then he grinned at me.

Brandt was almost on top of us.

---

"Бунтарь!"

The words had me frozen to the spot. Shock. Horror. Acceptance. In the back of my mind, I could hear Wanda's distant, long-ago warning: "Amelia! Cover your ears!"

But I couldn't. My body refused to obey me. Those first two words alone, and I no longer belonged to myself. My mind was slowly losing control.

I was vaguely aware of Simmons yanking on my arm, panicked at my sudden lack of response at this newly arrived threat. The KGB agent was only five feet away. There was a grin on his face. He knew he had me.

He was already speaking the next word: "Колумбия, Стре—"

Fwit.

A bullet disappeared into the snow at my feet. The KGB agent went rigid, his jaw hanging open, unable to finish the word. Blood slipped down from a hole in his forehead, that hadn't been there a second ago.

Simmons and I watched, stunned, as he keeled over into the drift.
Brandt was five feet away. Gauntlets of fire in her hands. Snow melted away at her presence, turning to slush, water. Revealing cold, hard ground beneath. That, too, was scorched away, leaving only an ugly black scar behind.

Behind her, three more Extremis agents. I recognized Johansson. All of them, ablaze, ready to end this rebellion.

I was halfway to a kneel, ready to face her. Even as blood dripped down my face. Even as my head pounded, screaming for release. The world spun and swayed around me.

I didn't have much longer, anyways.

Pietro pulled on my arm, away from them. Could he carry me? Was he strong enough? He was better off not wasting that energy on me.

I didn't have time to think on other options. All I knew was how to fight.

"You should have listened, Amelia," Brandt sneered, slowing as she neared. She wanted to revel in this moment. See my face before I died. She always liked that part of her job. "Look at you! You can barely stand! You won't make it another mile."

She was probably right. But I'd rather die, trying to reach another mile, than go back to the Crucible.

I couldn't say it, but I knew Brandt could see the answer on my face. She bared her teeth. "Disappointing. Well, if that's how you want it, fine. I'll only be too happy to oblige. Boys?"

The Extremis agents behind her laughed as they sided up next to her. A formidable line. In different circumstances, I probably could have taken them. But not like this. I was too weak. Too broken.

Brandt initiated the attack. A burst of fire. Pietro and I threw ourselves out of the way, but I wasn't quite fast enough. The explosion caught me, sent me crashing into some brittle underbrush. Twigs and branches cut at my skin as I landed. By the time I recovered, scrambled behind a fallen log, Brandt and the other three had caught up.

But I wasn't on my own.

The sound of running. Wanda crying out.

"Leave. Her — " Two pale legs leapt over me. Wanda landed on the other side of the log, throwing up her arms. " — Alone!"

The entire world went scarlet.

"What in the world —?" she gasped, stunned at the dead man lying before us. It took me a moment to overcome the effects of the first trigger words and realize what had happened.

"Sniper," I breathed, my gaze shooting up, instantly figuring out the invisible path of the bullet.

Up, up. Up into the Crucible. Someone was up there, watching the battle play out from above.

"Who is that?" Simmons asked, leaning heavily on me. I held up an arm, placing myself in front of her, just in case. "Did you call in reinforcements?"

"No." I said, low. My eyes were still on the fortress above me. The perfect vantage point. For a
second, I thought I saw a tiny glint, high up on a turret. "That's not one of us."

"Then who —" Simmons continued, but I grabbed her arm, turned on my heel.

"C'mon, we have to keep going!" I shouted right over her, nearly having to drag her along, away from her gaze of the Crucible.

The Extremis soldiers went flying.

Wanda emitted a pulse-like wave, punctuated by her scream. I ducked, covered my head as what felt like tsunami came crashing over me.

Wind, a gale. Powerful, thick, nearly suffocating. Almost solid in matter, and blistering, stinging, like hot needles piercing my flesh. The snow beneath me evaporated instantly. The log I had cowered behind turned to ash, simply blasted away, dissolved to the nuclear level.

A loud roaring filled my ears, echoes of Wanda's voice. I thought my head might burst from the pressure.

Then it was over.

Utter silence. The stinging vanished. I picked my head up.

Wanda was on her knees in the dirt, arms limp at her sides, breathing hard. Everything around her had been turned to ash. Snow, trees, rock, everything destroyed in a perfect thirty-foot radius.

A flash of silver. Pietro at her side, helped her up, whispering to her. "Get up, please get up, Wanda, we have to go…"

As we tore after Ward, Skye, and Fitz, I saw another man fall, his head snapped back in a burst of blood, falling face first into the snow. He had only been ten feet away.

A woman, who only seconds ago tried shooting at us, collapsed against a tree.

"What the hell?" I heard Skye shout ahead, reeling when she saw a man's head burst right in front of her. Still running, she looked over her shoulder and yelled, "Who is that?"

At the far rear, I was too far away to give a response. I could feel Simmons' eyes on me; maybe she knew I was holding onto the answer. But what could I say? I already knew they wouldn't believe me.

Another Vulkan, female, rounded around the tree. Like the first agent, she seemed determined to activate turncoat protocols. "Бунтарь! Колумбия!"

How many of them knew the trigger phrase? Higher-ups in the Komitet, or the entire Crucible facility? Maybe they started handing out the passphrase like candy once they figured out I was on the attack. I hoped it was the former. My shield deflected her bullet just in time. No sooner had I felt the impact did she drop, hole through her heart.

We couldn't stay to ponder the damage Wanda had just incurred.

Once she was back on her feet, we kept going.
Her attack had given us another head start. The KGB were scattered, but they'd regroup again, and relocate us if we didn't leave immediately. I didn't see Brandt or the others. Secretly, I prayed she had been killed in the blast. Was there even a possibility of surviving that?

Something akin to hope started to bloom in my chest.

There could only be one person responsible for this. Only one man who could eliminate a target over three hundred yards away, in the dead of night, in freezing temperatures. All without a sound.

The KGB agents themselves didn't seem to know what was going on, either. I could see them hesitating before coming after us now.

A fourth collapsed, silently, as if killed by a ghost.

That did it. Frantic wails rose up from the trees. Some decided to turn tail and run, rather than risk becoming another target. One of them shouted in Russian, "It's SHIELD! They brought a sniper!"

But that wasn't true. They had no idea this was friendly fire. Deliberate friendly fire.

"You don't know?" Ward demanded. "I thought it was May. You didn't call this in?"

"May has no idea we're here! It has to be someone else!"

"Who cares?" Fitz said, his voice high-pitched, freaking out. "They're on our side, right? Just keep going, we're almost there!"

We didn't stop until we were sure we lost them.

We didn't stop for another mile. Maybe two. The effort was exhausting. I could feel my body starting to lag. Everything hurt. The pounding in my head had become so unbearable that I was plagued with moments of completely blindness. Hearing loss.

But it didn't stop me from smiling a little, as we finally jogged to a stop, in the middle of nowhere. The Crucible, the mountain it lied sequestered within, was far behind us. I could no longer see it anymore. A strange sound came out of my throat, earning alarmed looks from Wanda and Pietro.

"What?" I asked.

Pietro tilted his head. "Oh, nothing. I... I just never heard you laugh before."

"It sounds weird," Wanda added, starting to giggle. She shared a look with Pietro, and he grinned.

I chuckled, although it was broken a little by tiny sobs. Not sadness, but relief. Overwhelming relief. I gazed at Wanda and Pietro, their expressions of happiness. Pietro's arms hanging as he relaxed for the first time. Wanda sagging against him, no longer afraid.

We did it. We were free.

Two gunshots. My laugh died in my throat.

I stumbled on a branch hidden beneath the snow. I had been dealing with a headache this entire time but this was the first in a while that I felt legitimately distracted. The lurch of the fall made my heart skip, my stomach clench. For a second, I thought I had been shot.
Then I recovered, shook my head, adjusted Simmons on my shoulder.

"Are you okay?" she asked, frowning as she wobbled, trying to keep her bad ankle off the ground.

"F-fine," I muttered, putting my gaze forward. It was tough, resisting the urge to look behind me, at the Crucible. It felt wrong. Like I would be the next target with a bullet through my head. "J-just feeling a little nauseous."

Right on cue, a KGB agent running in the opposite direction went down, suddenly headless. All I saw was a dark silhouette, but it was enough.

Simmons let out a tiny scream.

We started to run again.

I'd never been shot before.

This is new, was the only thought I had. So this is what it feels like.

The two bullets hit me almost simultaneously. Slammed directly into my back, like someone had punched me. The force knocked the breath out of my lungs. I leaned forward slightly, a gust of air leaving my lips in a cloud of fog.

Everything slowed. The world came to a complete standstill. Snow starting to fall, flakes caught in midair. Wanda and Pietro, frozen in a moment of action.

The pain in my head had reached a crescendo. No pulsing; just a long, continuous note of torment, like a shrieking off-key horn.

I knew what had happened immediately. My brain translated the report of the gun with the impact I felt and made the correct conclusion.

I wanted to turn around, to see who did it. But I had strangely lost all feeling in my body. It didn't respond to me anymore.

Like I was under protocol again.

All I saw were the looks of horror on Pietro and Wanda's faces.

Seconds stretched out into eternity. I wondered why nothing was moving. Why the world seemed to be tilting on a bad angle.

Then my knees gave out beneath me.

"I see it!" Fitz' voice rang out, bouncing off the empty forest floor. The snow wasn't as disturbed here. I found our old trail.

Simmons was panting hard. The pain and the exertion of running was catching up to her, and she wasn't built for extreme sports. I was supporting more and more of her weight the closer we got to the quinjet.

I was almost surprised when Skye doubled-backed to help me with Simmons. It wasn't necessary. I was strong enough to carry her in my arms if I had to, but that would sacrifice the safety the shield provided. Still, I gave a small nod of thanks as Skye took up Simmons' other side, and we headed
together towards a small clearing.

The only the bay door was visible, a dark, gaping hole with a ramp leading to the ground. Fitz had already disappeared into the cockpit. Ward had stationed outside, covering for us with his weapon in case any other hostiles appeared.

Then the outline of the quinjet flickered against the forest backdrop, before returning to its original black color. The engines spluttered blue before warming to a low hum. The quinjet nosed down and it rose several feet into the air. Ward clambered onto the ramp, reaching out for us as we caught up.

I felt a grin form across my face as we crossed that last twenty meters.

The ground came rushing to meet my face.

Pietro caught me first.

"No, no, no, no…!"

His arms came around me, slowing my fall to the ground. He came to a crouch, and all I saw was his face, the mottled clouds above, the twisting black fingers of tree branches.

The world suddenly shot back to regular speed, like a record skipping. I choked. I couldn't breathe. My lungs spasmed in my chest. My hands turned to fists, grasping helplessly, clutching to Pietro's arms.

I could see his mouth moving. His voice faded in and out, like a tuning radio. "Amelia...hear me? Can you...please, stay with me... don't —!"

He was cut off by a sharp cry. I saw a bolt of scarlet energy fly over his head, followed by the sound of a yelp. Wanda, striking the one who'd shot me. Apparently, that was all it took, because I saw nothing else, heard nothing else, until her face joined Pietro’s above mine.

There were tears in her eyes. Her hands were on my face. The blood was only now starting to dry. But the agony didn't cease.

Pietro looked to his sister, said something. His lips moved wordlessly, but I understood what he said. Do something, sister. Save her.

But Wanda only shook her head helplessly, biting her lip. There was nothing she could do.

"I can make it go away," she whispered, voice hoarse. "So, it doesn't hurt anymore."

It occurred to me that this all felt very familiar. Dying, that is.

I wanted to say something to them. Final words to remember me by. Something poetic, something wise. Like in the movies.

But my breath rattled in my throat. My tongue was thick and dry in my mouth. I couldn't remember how to speak. My mind couldn't think past the shrieking pain. The memories, the protocol fighting against one another, even as everything was falling apart. Even as my heart started to slow, both parts were still struggling for dominance.

Who would I be when I die? What would I leave behind?

When Wanda took my hand, all I could do was squeeze, just so she'd have some form of an answer.
I finally found the will to speak. Enough for one word.

"Go."

She nodded, understanding. Her thumb stroked my forehead, and for an instant my entire vision turned to blood.

And just like that, the pain was gone.

Soft, sweet emptiness replaced it.

My vision returned. My hands had gone cold. I no longer had the strength to hold onto them. My hand slipped away from his arm, her hand.

Breathing ragged. It felt there was a giant weight on top of me, pulling me down. Cold rose to meet my body, cradled in the snow.

Pietro was shaking his head, refusing to leave, even as Wanda tried to pull him away. Both had tears in their eyes. I wanted to tell them they were taking too long, that they needed to go before the KGB caught up.

At the same time, I wanted them to stay.

I didn't want to be alone.

Wanda relented, and they turned back to me. Stayed, for a moment longer. Pietro pushed a piece of hair out of my face.

A fog slipped over my mind.

"You're going to be okay," he said.

I blinked, smiled. I couldn't remember his name.

My eyes were heavy. The ground was so soft. My head fell back against the pillow that wasn't there. Tired, so tired.

It was time to sleep.

My eyes closed again. The weight lifted off my chest.

And the world slipped away.

The echoes of death whispered in my head.

"Holy shit!" Skye crowed as the quinjet rose into the air, the ramp closing behind us. She pumped her fist into the air. "We did it!"

She threw her hand at me, and I rose mine up, taking the high-five in complete bewilderment. Then Skye took me by the shoulders, jostling me, then a hug. "We kicked ass! Mission success!"

"Yes, you three did very well," Simmons nodded appreciatively. She sat along the bench, foot propped up. She was shivering, only dressed in a shirt and jeans (unlike Fitz, Skye, and myself, in our winter gear), but her smile was genuine. "I'm pleased to see those Night-Night pistols proved useful. I suppose we can't argue with Fitz now as to what to name them, can we?"
"Nope!" Fitz called from the cockpit, sounding very pleased with himself. The cabin of the quinjet filled with a low roar as we rose in altitude and gained speed.

Finally, we were going home.

Ward seemed beside himself in shock. He slumped onto a bench against the wall, running a hand through his hair. "Unbelievable. Un-freaking-believable. Got to admit, Coulson's got more faith you than I do. I can't believe he actually sent you guys alone on this."

Skye went very still, her eyes widening, before dropping to the floor. Fitz had gone very stiff in his seat. I didn't know what to do, so I just stood there awkwardly, as if I didn't notice the tension change in the quinjet.

Ward and Simmons exchanged looks. "Guys?" Simmons asked, gazing around and unable to receive anyone's eyes.

Skye shifted on her feet, hand rising to her head as she turned her gaze to the ceiling, as if it were suddenly very interesting. "Uh, yeah, about that…"

"Oh my god," Ward said, jaw dropping, before slumping against the wall, head in hands. "Oh my god. No. No, no, no. Do not tell me this was an unsanctioned mission."

"This is an unsanctioned mission," I said flatly, earning a punch from Skye.

"Come on, seriously?" she said, as if I'd betrayed her.

"What, you thought we could lie to them?" I said back at her, holding up a hand. "I think as soon as we see Coulson again, they'd figure it out."

Simmons hands were over her mouth, her eyes wide in utter shock. Her attention turned to Fitz, who had gone strangely pale under the light of the control panel. "Fitz! You defied orders to save us!"

"Well!" Fitz started, indignant. "No one else was going to do it!"

"I know," Simmons said, and her hands fell away to reveal a soft smile. "That was very brave of you, Leo. Stupid, but brave."

"I know what you're going to say, Gemma, but —" Fitz came to an abrupt stop. Her words seemed to take him by surprise, who looked ready to dive deep into a prepared rant until that moment. He paused, dipped his head, then said, "Oh. Um, thank you, I guess. But I can't take all the credit. It was Skye's idea."

"Of course it was." Ward muttered, crossing his arms. "No one else would do something as mind-boggling stupid as directly defying Fury's orders besides Skye."

She threw him a dry smile. "I aim to please."

"And who the hell are you?" Ward demanded, pointing a finger at me. "I know for a goddamn fact you're not a SHIELD agent, so don't bother lying to me,"

"Uh," I said, because I was, in fact, planning to lie, but was now reconsidering. Apparently, Skye and Fitz hadn't told him everything when they rescued him. But Simmons beat me to it.

"She's Rebel Columbia," Simmons replied with a grin.

"I am?" I turned to her, caught off-guard. The words sounded oddly familiar, but I couldn't
remember where I'd heard them last.

Ward looked utterly baffled by this. Even Skye seemed taken aback. She glanced at me, and I could tell what she was thinking; that I may have lied to her, that maybe I had another identity she didn't know about. "Rebel Columbia? Where'd you get that?"

"From those KGB agents chasing us." Simmons answered simply, and I shifted back on my heels when I realized what she meant, right before she said it. Everyone else looked utterly baffled as Simmons continued, "That's what they shouted at us. Well, her, Mia, I mean, whenever they saw her."

"It was in Russian," I pointed out, trying not to freak out that these were the first words to the Crucible's trigger phrase, just in a different language. But they had no effect on me in English. Just like Wanda had predicted.

"We took a semester abroad together in St. Petersburg," Fitz answered, sounding only mildly annoyed. "Gemma likes to bring it up every chance she gets."

"I do not!" Simmons retorted, although there was a guilty look on her face. When she noticed me staring, she insisted, "I don't! I just thought it was a... very worthwhile experience!"

"Sure, sure," Fitz snickered, and Simmons reached over the seat to smack him in the shoulder.

"Hm, Rebel Columbia," Skye mused, crossing her arms thoughtfully as she looked me up and down. She tilted her head, gave a small, satisfied nod. "I kinda like it."

"Oh, please," I shook my head, wincing. "Don't make this a thing."

"Too late for that, chica," Skye grinned wickedly. "This is most definitely a thing now."

I could only barely contain a groan.

Ward just sat there, scowling, his foot tapping. He seemed incredibly displeased with everyone in the quinjet. He said, "Wow, jokes and codenames? Really working on the important stuff here? Do you guys have any idea how much trouble we're all in? I can't wait to hear what Coulson has to say."
art by me :)

http://rebelecolumbia.tumblr.com/
Okay, so you know that forest scene in Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows (the RDJ movie) where they’re running from the Germans? I love that scene. Also three guesses as to who the sniper is, and the first two don’t count ;P

Also also, I edited chapters 1-6, 14, 18, and 23, thanks to Homecoming. I really hope those are the last story changes I’ll be making to old chapters lol. Please check them out if you have the time :)
So I got a question from user nightwingbaby1 about the faceclaims of the main characters. Peter, Wanda, and Pietro are as they appear in the MCU movies (that is, “played” by their actors in Ultron/Civil War/Homecoming). Mia’s faceclaim is Grace Quealy, particularly when she was younger. She is also on the cover image of this fic. Hope that helps!

In case there’s any confusion, this fic has a good 10-15 chapters yet, it's not quite over lol. My only regret is not giving May more “screen-time” so to speak; then again, maybe it fits into her mystique. Also, the fic is currently set right before Iron Man 3.

Chapter Thirty-Two

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you're in?" Coulson demanded when we got back.

The five of us were lined up against the wall in Coulson's office — a small but stately room within the Bus. Warm morning light spilled in from the little porthole windows, giving the room a nice golden-pink aura. The chocolatey aroma of coffee hung in the air — someone liked their mocha lattes. A mahogany desk decorated with a bronze eagle statuette, some photo frames and a plaque with Coulson’s name on it. Shelves with gadgets, memorabilia, marksmanship trophies. Nothing personal, it seemed, nothing that might have hinted at a private life. I would've appreciated the room more if I wasn't currently being chewed out.

"Deliberately disobeying direct orders, stealing SHIELD equipment, kidnapping a civilian, and going completely AWOL for five hours, among dozens of other serious infractions!" Coulson continued, pacing back forth, trying to keep composure and failing. He swung his arms around, gesturing for emphasis. "You're lucky we weren't entertaining any of the top brass this week! Otherwise every single one of you would be court-martialed before you got off that quinjet."

There was a length of silence following that, with Coulson pinning each of us with hard looks. Both Skye and Fitz were busy studying their feet. Leaning against the opposite wall was a short Asian woman, middle-aged, black eyes wielding a death glare that could freeze lava. She hadn't said a single word so far, but I had the distinct feeling she must be that Agent May Skye had mentioned earlier, that Fitz had been lowkey afraid of. I could see why he felt that way now.

Then, next to me, Ward raised his hand, "Uh, why are we here? Simmons and I didn't do anything —"

"Because this is a message to the entire team," Coulson snapped, and Ward dropped his hand immediately. Coming to a stop, Coulson faced us and said, "Neither I nor SHIELD will tolerate further acts of disobedience. This isn't the wild west, we aren't cowboys running off on private
missions whenever we feel like it. There are laws for a reason. This is how we stand above reproach. Any mistake we make gives ammunition to our enemies. Do you want President Ellis to disavow us? The moment we lose international backing, we become completely exposed to anything and everyone who's got something against us. Especially after we just pissed off the likes of the Chairman and Baron von Strucker. I can't wait to see how that will come back to bite us in the ass!"

Skye picked her head up, scowling. "Wait a second, did you just say kidnapping earlier? That's not true! Mia volunteered —"

"No one volunteers for SHIELD without my say-so, and certainly not minors!"

"We'd never bring a child with us! Mia said she was eighteen —" Fitz spoke up, only to be immediately cut off.

"And it didn't occur to you that she would lie?" May demanded, speaking for the first time as she stepped forward next to Coulson. "Deceive you in order to get what she wanted?"

"Lie?" Skye snorted, then looked at me with a disbelieving smirk, as if we were sharing a joke. But my face had started to grow warm with everyone talking about me as though I wasn't there. Skye faltered when she saw the flush in my cheeks. "Mia? You didn't — I mean, you're not —"

What could I say? I just gave her a sheepish shrug, a small, guilty smile pulling on my lips.

"Oh no," Fitz groaned, closing his heads, head falling back. "Oh, no."

"You didn't read that TIME article, did you?" Coulson asked in that way that said he already knew she hadn't.

"No, why?" Skye flashed Coulson an uncertain look, before going back to me; her wry expression giving away to rising horror. "Wait, if you're not eighteen, then how old are you really?"

I hesitated for a moment. Then answered, "F-fifteen."

Skye gaped at me. A strange choking sound came out of her mouth, all blood draining from her face in under a second. Fitz let out another groan, this one longer and filled with terrible realization — covering his face with his hands, he slumped against the wall behind him. Even Ward and Simmons looked surprised, with Ward letting out a quick guffaw before covering it with his fist and pretending to cough instead.

"Oh, dear," Simmons pressed her lips together, hand running down her face as she glanced over at the shaken Fitz. "That's not good. That's not good at all…"

"Monsters," Fitz whispered to himself, pulling at his cheeks with his fingers. "We're monsters…!"

Coulson and May watched these reactions with detached amusement. Ward, seeing his teammates struggle with this revelation, half-heartedly intervened, "In all fairness, sir, she doesn't look fifteen —"

"If you think that's a valid excuse, try again," Coulson replied, unimpressed. "Until future notice, all four of you are grounded, and on double cleaning shifts until I get this all cleared with Director Fury."

"And that's after you've debriefed me on everything that happened," May added. "Everything."

"Dismissed," Coulson said, and as everyone shifted and started headed towards the door (with
various expressions of relief or impending dread), Coulson held up his hand to me before I could pass. "Except you, Mia."

I came to a stop, frowning as everyone else vacated the room, leaving only me and Coulson behind. Skye was the last person to leave, throwing me one last worried look before May shut the door. I rocked back on my heels, trying to quash the growing fear in my stomach. I was still wearing my fatigues, dusted with ash and bits of concrete. My helmet, shield, and weapons had been removed after leaving the quinjet.

As soon as he was sure there would be no eavesdroppers, Coulson dipped his head to me, before approaching the wall of TV screens directly opposite his desk. With a flick of his hand, all the screens were wiped clear — maps, schematics, personal data files disappearing in one go. "I'm surprised you didn't try to defend yourself back there."

"I don't regret what I did," I said, choosing my words carefully. Unfortunately, it made me sound stilted, and more adult than I really was. Which Coulson was probably completely aware of by now. "I'm not going to apologize for lying."

"Well, I'd say you're honest, but we've already established that you have no issue with manipulating the truth for your own purposes," Coulson said dryly. "But I suppose I can thank you for not trying to bullshit me."

"Um, you're welcome," I muttered, pulling a face to myself. "I-I guess."

"You'd be surprised how many would try to talk their way out of this mess," Coulson said, facing me again, clasping his hands behind his back. With everyone gone now, he seemed much more at ease, and the anger I saw earlier had vanished under a calm, implacable facade. "As far as we're concerned, this never happened. And by this, I mean your involvement with both my agents and all activity surrounding the Crucible. SHIELD's not going to get caught with pie in its face because of a couple of upset agents and one teenager with attitude had a little too much initiative. Our PR is pretty good right now, we can't have the world thinking we can't manage our own assets."

"You're...disavowing me?" I asked after a moment of hesitation, wondering if this was some sort of joke. Coulson always came off as light-hearted, but even this seemed a bit much for him.

"Correct," Coulson nodded, passing me again towards his desk. I rotated on the spot to watch him. "Officially, this mission was sanctioned by both myself and Director Fury. We pulled a black op rescue mission in hostile territory. Our GPS location history will indicate that the Bus was on standby five miles out from the Crucible, ready to provide back-up if necessary — and not, in fact, a thousand miles away circling London cluelessly. The mission was a resounding success, with no casualties taken and all targets rescued. There will be no record of you, or anyone codenamed Rebel Columbia, having been involved in this mission. As far as we're concerned, you never even left London. You will get absolutely no recognition in helping save my team."

"I didn't do it for the recognition."

A small smile pulled on Coulson's lips. He said nothing as he turned away, studying what looked like a framed trading card on his desk. "And how did that shield work out for you?"

"Incredible. I didn't think it'd actually deflect bullets," I said. "Until it did."

"Sad to let it go?"

"I mean, it doesn't exactly fit in a carry-on. " I shrugged, glanced out the small porthole window. "I
just want to go home. I don't want to take any of this — I gestured vaguely around the room, — with me."

"Good to know," Coulson replied, but I couldn't tell if he sounded pleased or just amused by my answer. "For the sake of maintaining SHIELD's integrity, we'll be sending you home. Under normal conditions, we'd bring you into the fold, but personally I find it rather difficult to trust someone who repeatedly lied about her age and refuses to give us a legitimate name, not helped by the fact that your face has no match in any database we can find. Those actions alone would get someone jailed for an indefinite period of time. But the SHIELD I signed up for doesn't unlawfully imprison kids, without trial, for actions they refuse to officially announce to the public. Even if those kids have superpowers and take advantage of full-grown adults who are just a little too trusting."

For a moment, I was too stunned to speak. "...Wait, what? You're really letting me go home?"

"Yes, but on one condition," Coulson held up a finger. "Don't pull another stunt like that again. The next time we pick you up, it might be for good. The official records will show that you're just a random civilian teenager we picked up after the attack in London, who we've kept anonymous for her safety, promptly returned home to the location of her choosing after a brief quarantine.

"And unofficially," Coulson continued, and that small, enigmatic smile returned, "You were invaluable to this mission. Your knowledge of the Crucible and the Chairman has given us new insight into his operations. And you've done me a great personal service."

"I have?"

"There's rarely a time when someone in my position gets to witness the courage and loyalty his team shares for one another," he said. "A loyalty that I never would've expected from a crew this new, this young. On the other hand, I find it awfully convenient that the friends you wanted to rescue had already escaped by the time you reached the Crucible."

There was an unasked question there that I already had the answer to. Lifting my chin a little, I replied, "I-I've got my own team to look out for, Mr. Coulson."

A tiny muscle twitched under his eye. "It's Agent Coulson."

"Oh. Sorry," I winced at my own slip-up. What could I say, I was used to calling adults like they were schoolteachers.

Coulson studied me for a moment, before deciding my apology sincere, nodding to himself. He went around his desk, coming to sit down in the leather chair. Lacing his fingers across his desk, he went on, "My agents say you claimed to have seen a man called the Winter Soldier while inside the Crucible. According to them, this is the same man you said attacked you and your friends on the bridge. Is this true?"

"He was there," I pressed, approaching his desk in earnest. I was only mildly caught off guard. Of course, Skye and Fitz would tell him about that. After that big warning I gave them before we landed. "You have to believe me. The Winter Soldier isn't a myth."

"Even though we have no solid proof he exists?" Coulson pointed out, and my stomach plummeted with disappointment. "That you're the only one who's ever laid eyes on him?"

"I wasn't the only one," I retorted. "The twins saw him, too, back on the bridge. The Winter Soldier is an agent of the KGB, the Chairman and his Soviet Underground or whatever you want to call it. He's been working for them for years. Decades."
"Ah, these twins," Coulson shook his head. "Who just so happened to get away before they could back up your story, is that right? Forgive me for being unable to put stock on your word alone, Mia."

I opened my mouth but found myself unable to protest. The odds were stacked against me here. Not only was a 60+ year-old super assassin a little hard to believe, but I was just a stupid kid who'd already proven herself untrustworthy, without a lick of evidence for support. Offhand, I was starting to wonder if I was going crazy, that maybe I just hallucinated the Winter Soldier into existence, since it was so hard to convince people he was real.

But deep down, I knew the truth. Up against the Winter Soldier, I was just out of my league.

"Anyways," Coulson's voice broke through my thoughts. Apparently realizing he'd caught me at a stalemate, he decided to change the topic. "You mentioned the Chairman. Now him, we've got plenty of evidence. Interesting fella. Did you know he used to be a CIA operative during the Soviet-Afghan War? Humble beginnings for a tyrannical despot. Of course, the CIA cannot confirm or deny he'd ever been part of their establishment, but that's beside the point." Coulson cleared his throat, looking a little embarrassed to have digressed so much. "What exactly led the Chairman to choosing you, of all people, to turn into a Super Soldier? Why go all the way to America when he had plenty of his own subjects to use?"

I could only shrug helplessly. "I'm n-not sure. He told me once th-that I already had th-the serum in my veins. That I was born with it."

"Born with it? As in, you inherited it?" Coulson asks, frowning. He paused, thinking. "From your father, perhaps?"

"The Chairman said the same thing," I said. What led Coulson to that conclusion? Was I missing something here? I tilted my head in confusion. "Why?"

But Coulson just shook his head, studying his desk for a moment in private contemplation. "Hm, no reason."

Color me suspicious, but I had a feeling that he was holding out on me. I had just opened my mouth to say so, but Coulson beat me to it. "You know, you still haven't told us your real name."

"Am I really supposed to believe you're just letting me go?" I countered. "That you won't monitor me to make sure I behave?"

Coulson blinked, then sat back in his chair, steepling his hands in front of his chin. For a second, he didn't speak; I hadn't answered his question, and from the looks of things, he wasn't going to answer mine — because we both already knew what the answer would be, regardless of whether he said it or not.

Caught in a stalemate, and probably guessing he wasn't going to get any more out of me, Coulson just offered me one last smile. "Have a nice day, Mia. I hope our next meeting will be under better circumstances."

"If we meet again." I corrected, frowning as I stepped back.

"I believe that's up to you," Coulson replied, smirking a little. "Don't forget the conditions of your release. Get home safely."
"So," Skye piped up from the driver's seat, casting me a look. "You gonna tell me why you needed to borrow my laptop before we left the Bus? I noticed you deleted all the history. Or is it another one of your secrets?"

She said this last part with a conspiratorial grin, like I was little kid hiding a toy behind her back. I wasn't sure who decided that it'd be Skye who'd drive me to Heathrow airport, but I was pretty sure it was intentionally done with the purpose to annoy me at the highest capacity.

We were in a nondescript black sedan that smelled vaguely of gunpowder and explosives. It was late morning, traffic making the day seem longer already. On the drive to the airport, I witnessed London in the aftermath of the attack. When I had first arrived here, the streets were easy and bright. Now, they were full of patrolling officers, and there was a notable urgency to the way people walked. It had only been two days since the attack and everyone was still on high alert. Air travel had just resumed, and only to certain countries.

Luckily, the USA was one of them.

"It's not a secret," I replied, peering out the window as the Thames came into view for a moment. I couldn't see Tower Bridge from here, but I spotted a round of helicopters circling above the rooftops. "I just like my privacy."

"Sure, sure," Skye rolled her eyes. "And not just to send another email to a friend, right? Without getting SHIELD on their tail, too."

I opened my mouth to defend myself, but was cut off by Skye's laughter. "Hey, it's fine, I'd do the same thing if I were in your position. Hell, I was in your position just a few weeks ago. At least you get to go home, and with a sick new identity, too."

I glanced down at the fake passport in my lap. The blue cover said I was an American citizen, which was true. The picture inside was my face, but the age and name were not. "Gertrude Fitzroy? What am I, a prairie farmer in 1880's Kentucky?"

"Oh, come on, it's not bad!" Skye protested, although she was having a hard time convincing behind that shit-eating grin. "Your nickname can be Gertie!"

"Oh my god." I breathed in an undertone.

"Hey, beggars can't be choosers," Skye held up a finger as we headed into the entryway by Terminal 2. Coming to a park behind a row of taxis, she continued, "You wouldn't have this problem if you just told us your real name. I mean, it'd still be a forged passport, but at least the FBI won't accuse you of lying if they catch you."

I threw her a disgruntled look, although it was only half-hearted. I knew Skye was just teasing me. "Yeah. I think I'll just stick with Gertrude."

Her eyes sparkled. "Excellent plan."

As we got out of the car, however, I realized that wasn't the end of it when Skye asked, "So, what did Coulson want to talk to you about? He usually doesn't have private convos unless it's important."

"He just wanted to know what I knew," I said, picking up my backpack and slamming the car door
shut. I was dressed in new clothes; I kind of wanted to keep the fatigues, but those had to be returned to SHIELD, but Simmons had been kind enough to pack my old effects in my carry-on, including my yellow raincoat and the photographs I'd taken (resurrected from the water damage taken by my dunk in the river). It was the only piece of luggage I had. "About the Crucible, the Chairman, the Winter Soldier. Apparently, my knowledge was in-invaluable."

"Aww, he complimented you?" Skye's eyebrows shot up; she sounded both impressed and envious at once. "He never says anything nice to me. I mean, he does, but it's like I gotta wring it out of him, you know? Anyways, what's the dealio with your dad?"

"I may have eavesdropped," Skye made a wincing face, holding up her thumb and index finger close together. "Just a little bit. Enough to hear Coulson asking about it — the Chairman picked you out because of it? Yeah, that's what I thought. So, I guess you never knew your dad, right?"

I couldn't help but give her a beseeching look as we entered the terminal. Now Skye was getting a little close to scary-true. "What, are you psychic now, too?"

"Just a lucky guess," Skye said with a self-satisfied shrug, following me inside. She jerked a thumb to her chest. "Take it from the token orphan, I know the feeling of not knowing who your parents are. And, honestly, if you knew your dad, you'd be freaking out a lot more than you are right now."

"What? Why?" I asked as we pulled through a crowd of people exiting — what looked like a high school soccer (football?) team, a family with three kids, and some odd businessmen here and there.

"Because — " Skye started, before stumbling over kid's dragging duffle bag. I caught her before she could fall. "Ugh, thanks. Because your dad, someone you've known all your life, someone you thought was completely normal, is in fact a Super Soldier. But you don't seem bothered at all."

I just laughed, shaking my head. But there was a slight tremble to my voice. I had to be completely honest with myself — I had never actually thought about it. Never really considered what the Chairman's words had meant back then. Of course, it was all just a fractured memory, and the nature of those bothered me more than the sum of the contents, so I liked to think I had a pretty good excuse for not realizing the truth sooner…

"Mia, seriously, think about it," Skye insisted, coming to a stop long enough for me to see the sincerity in her face. She was being completely serious for once. "How many people like you actually exist? People like me? Who could that possibly even mean… I paused, my laughter cutting off short when I finally cottoned on to what she was getting at. "Wait, y-you're not saying —?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Skye raised her eyebrows at me, hands on her hips.

"C-cap..." I almost couldn't say it. We were surrounded by people. Anyone could overhear. My next words came out forced, hushed: "Captain America? But how? I-i-it's just not —"

"Possible?" Skye guessed, crossing her arms with a knowing look on her face. "I don't know, maybe. But who else could it be, right?"

"No way." I held up my hands, palms out, as I rocked back on my heels. Shaking my head pointlessly. "There's just no way..."

"Look, maybe I'm wrong, but I don't think the odds are in your favor," Skye had the decency to look
sympathetic. Then her attitude switched when I started to turn around again. "Oh, come on, you aren't going to ask me who he is? SHIELD's the only one who knows his real name. I mean, you've got to be curious."

I bit my lip, unwilling to admit it. Yet, I lingered.

"His name is Steve Rogers." Skye smirked, a knowing look that was starting to bug me a little. Then she shrugged one shoulder. "Maybe ask your mom about him when you get home. If anyone knows, she would."

I didn't have a response for that. Honestly, I was too scared to think of anything to say. Too stunned, really. "I-I guess…"

Offhand, I knew the last thing I was going to ask Mom when I got home would be about my father. Are you kidding? She probably thought I was dead until I just, what, show up at home one day? Looking completely different? Covered in bruises and scars and tattoos? Uh, yeah, my father would be the last thing on her mind.

"Hey, don't overthink it," Skye said, punching me lightly in the shoulder, giving me an encouraging smile. "You've got plenty of time to ponder on the ride home. Nine-hour non-stop flight, economy class, gonna be fun! You'll really start to miss the quinjet by the end of it, I'll bet. This is the last leg of your trip! Then you get to go home and explain to everyone just where the hell you've been all this time."

"Wow, you really know how to look on the bright side of things."

"It's what I do," Skye winked at me, then patted my shoulder as I headed over to the ticket line. As we finally parted ways, she waved and called, "Stay safe, Gertie!"

I threw Skye one last look over my shoulder before she disappeared back into the exiting crowd, blending in perfectly with her dark clothes. Then I faced the line again, moving forward at a steady pace. There was even more security here than on the streets, which was saying something considering the current political climate.

My hand clenched tightly around my papers, knuckles white. I nearly bent the passport, nearly forgetting my strength again. I'd never been in an airport before. I'd never flown. I had no idea how things worked. Skye told me not to worry about it earlier on the way here, but now on my own again, I suddenly felt surrounded, overwhelmed, and very, very small again.

Breathe. I reminded myself. Just breathe. Last night you fought two dozen KGB agents and escaped the Crucible for the second time. One normal little airport isn't going to stop you now.

Fear and excitement and impatience all mixed together in my gut to make a confusing recipe. I was scared of the new experience, of getting in trouble again for things I shouldn't have and shouldn't be; excited to finally, finally be going home! Impatience just for this damn line to get moving, I only had another forty-five minutes till boarding time...

And on top of it all, I had some new information to mull over.

My fear of the airport slipped away as my mind started treading water, thinking of Captain America.

What Skye said sounded possible, and as much as I didn't want to admit it, might even be true. Could Captain America really be my father? I mean, Skye was right, there weren't exactly a lot of Super Soldiers running around, certainly none I could think of Mom ever running into...
But it didn't make any sense! The guy's been trapped in ice for over sixty years, when the hell did he have time to pop on over to New York City for a chance rendezvous with Mom? What, did he just go back under, leaving Mom with a baby for the next fifteen-odd years? That didn't seem very Captain America of him.

My brain just couldn't process the logic. Skye was right. The only one who could answer this would be Mom or Steve Rogers himself. Somehow, I doubted I was going to find his number in the Yellow Pages.

Eventually, I found myself boarding the jet for New York. My backpack was small enough I could stuff it under the seat in front of me. Sitting down, I stuck my feet under it, finding the weight a comfortable presence. I was one of the first to board, and managed to catch a window seat over the right wing. This was my first flight, might as well make the most of it.

...Except the Chairman knew, too, I realized privately, falling back to my original line of thought. He obviously knew who I was, where to find me. But he was a last resort — of all the people willing to tell me the true identity of my father, I figured the Chairman to be the least willing, and by far the least available. If it came down to it, I decided the question not worth answering; I wasn't going to chase down the Chairman just to know who my dad was. The risk just wasn't worth it.

I found myself pretty satisfied with this conclusion. It wasn't too different from my old one, regarding my father; in the end, it almost didn't matter to me. Maybe that would change, or maybe I was just lying to myself because I'm in serious denial, but still. I had priorities. I'd ask Mom, and if that led nowhere, then...well, I'd handle it.

It was at that moment I felt something nudge into my side. I didn't notice it at first, until the nudge turned into a sharp jab. I jumped, alarmed when the sensation didn't go away — when I recognized the feel of metal.

I looked down. The syringe dug into my ribcage, needle somewhere in my veins, plunger pressed all the way down. I didn't even see what had been inside. I followed the hand holding it, up the arm, to the face of the passenger who had sat next to me.

I recognized that red hair, that wolfish smile instantly.

"Missed me?" Brandt asked, her eyes gleaming.
Moodboard for pre-Crucible Mia made by @winter-is-ending on tumblr. Just wanted to give her a shout-out, I love this so much!
Chapter Thirty-Three

November 9th, 2012

9:47 PM

Peter was in the middle of his AP History reading when Ned showed up.

He hadn't been expecting it. Although it was a Friday evening, Peter was holed up in his room, doing homework. Why? Peter wasn't sure. He wasn't really feeling up to his usual shenanigans. Bitter pre-winter rain pattered against his window, a convincing argument against going out as Spider-Man tonight. And to be honest, he was rarely in the mood to socialize lately.

Losing eighty percent of your family in just a few years could do that to you.

But Peter wasn't necessarily averse to the idea when it came to Ned, who he could talk to about almost anything — more than he could ever talk about with May, at least.

So, this, Ned showing up at random, wasn't entirely unusual. Ned had been to Peter's apartment so often it sometimes felt empty when he was gone. They stayed up late at night, building Lego sets and playing video games. Aunt May never minded when it was abruptly decided that Ned would sleep over for the night.

It was a little unusual, however, to see him pale-faced and shaking all over, laptop case tucked under his arm when Aunt May opened the front door.

When he first heard the distant knocking on the door, Peter had no idea who it was, and sat perked up on his bed while he heard Aunt May answering the frantic noise. His initial thought was that it was Mrs. Garrison from down the hall, worried about her computer leaking radiation again.
That was obviously proven not the case when Peter heard May speak from his room: "...Ned? What in the... did you run all the way over here yourself?"

Ned's reply was muffled, breathless. "Hi, Mrs. Parker — is Peter here?"

"Ned?" Peter called, poking his head out of his room. He stepped out, only to be intercepted by Ned himself rushing straight for him — so fast they nearly collided. "Whoa, hey! Ned, what's the big deal? What are you even —?"

"I have to show you something!" Ned didn't even wait for Peter to finish before grabbing Peter's collar and dragging him back into his bedroom.

"Ack!" Peter choked, nearly yanked off his feet by Ned's pull. He stumbled into his desk, caught the edge at the last second. "Jeez, dude, you couldn't just call? It's almost ten at night —"

"It's too important for a phone call!" Ned replied, slamming the door shut, just as May was coming down the hall to see if everything was all right. Peter could still hear her talking on the other side. "...Peter? Ned?" She called after them, sounding as concerned as Peter felt. "Is everything all right?"

"It's fine!" Peter yelled through the door, on Ned's behalf. He decided, in that moment, his curiosity took priority over his bewildered irritation. "It's about, um..."

"A girl!" Ned supplied, earning a disgruntled look from Peter. He was soaking wet, Peter realized belatedly. Black hair plastered to his head, the shoulders of his bomber jacket soaked through, water dripping down off his chin. Ned really had come all this way by himself. "A girl we both know, from school!"

Peter had no idea what the hell Ned was doing, saying embarrassing things like that, but it did the trick. He heard May's chuckle, her relief that this wasn't a serious issue, at least for her. Peter liked to pretend she didn't know about Liz, but he knew that's what she was thinking of when she said, "Well, all right, then! Call me if you need anything, okay?"

"Okay!" Ned and Peter said in unison.

Under May's retreating footsteps, Peter hissed, "Did you really come all the way over here because of Liz?"

"Huh?" Now Peter was paying attention. He frowned, peered closer at the screen. Then turned to his own computer, brought up his inbox to compare. Mia's name was also at the top, indicating the account had been active recently. "How? Who could've logged in? No one knows her password."
"Hell if I know," Ned could only shrug. "Maybe she got hacked?"

"Who would want to do that?"

"Whoever said this," Ned replied, bringing up a chat box with Mia's account. "It took me a few minutes to realize she was on, you know? I didn't really think about it, but then I got excited! I sent them a message to see what the hell was going on. I thought maybe it was a glitch or something, because they didn't reply at first, but then…"

Ned seemed at a loss for words, as he scrolled down his own messages, to what her account replied with. Just one sentence, repeated each time with Ned's final replies.

*Show me the way home, honey.*

"I have no fucking idea what it means," Ned said, breaking his mother's rule of no swearing. Peter decided the action appropriate, given the circumstances. "And when I tried to video chat them, to see who it really was, all I got was this fancy room with a crystal chandelier. The hacker got out of the way just in time."

He pulled up a screenshot of the video chat, showing what was indeed an ornate room, with blue brocade wallpaper and coffered ceilings, gold leaf on the moldings. The couch directly in the foreground was empty, with the intent of a recently vacated seat. The only sign of the user was a blurry hand leaving the far right of the screen. In the back of his mind, Peter thought how odd the bruised knuckles were.

"But I didn't hear anything," Ned concluded sadly, slumping onto Peter's bed, hanging his head. "Wasn't fast enough, I guess. I'm sorry, Peter, I wish I had more to show you."

But Peter wasn't disappointed. His eyes flicked between the screenshot and Ned's chat box. Something about those words. It just seemed so familiar to him…

His eyes glanced over Mia's email address: *Gooseontheloose*

And then it clicked.

"Holy shit," Peter breathed, reading that same sentence over and over again. No way… "I can't believe it."

"What? Does it mean something?" Ned asked, his head picking up sharply. His eyes flicked between Peter and the screen, confused. "What am I missing here?"

"It's a quote from *Top Gun!*" Peter exclaimed, and at Ned's blank look he quickly explained. "It's one our favorite 80s movies! It's where we got our nicknames! Maverick and Goose?" Peter jabbed a finger at Ned's screen. "That's one of Goose's lines in the movie! It's from Mia!"

Ned just stared at Peter, and blinked rapidly when Peter grabbed him by the shoulders and said, "She's alive! She's still alive!"

That's when it finally dawned on Ned. His mouth opened, slowly at first, then dropped hard. "Oh, my god. Oh my god! Mia's alive!"

They said this together, jumping up and down in excitement. This was the first real good news they've had in weeks — maybe even months. All of Peter's doubts were wiped away in an instant, replaced with an indelible hope, to the point that he couldn't help but positively leap for joy. He had to tamp down on it a little, before he ended up sticking to the ceiling.
Then Ned stopped, gave Peter a funny look. "Wait, you named Mia after the best friend that died in
\textit{Top Gun}?"

Peter froze, caught off-guard, then finger-gunned at Ned. "You know, never really thought about it
until now."

"Wow." Ned said, making a face. "Wait, how come I never got a cool nickname?"

Peter dropped his arms, stupefied. "Seriously? This is an issue right now? Okay, fine, you can be
Iceman."

"No way! Iceman was the asshole! He wasn't Maverick's real friend!"

"Well!" Peter was sidelined by momentary frustration. Then it came to him, and he snapped his
fingers, "Oh, how about Merlin?"

Ned pursed his lips, considered it, then gave a satisfied nod. "Yeah, Merlin. The underrated wiz. I
can dig it."

"\textit{Boys?}" May called, making the both of them jump. "Is everything all right in there? What's all that
shouting about?"

"We're fine!" Peter called, flushing a little. A part of him felt guilty, keeping all of this from Aunt
May. She didn't know about the email, or Peter's suspicions about Mia. He wanted to, certainly, the
same way he wanted to tell May about being Spider-Man; but he didn't, and for the same reason: he
didn't want to hurt Aunt May. Chasing after wild theories, in denial about some of the worst
tragedies of his life, and on top of it all he was superhero vigilante risking his life stopping crime? At
only fifteen years old? Aunt May would have an absolute conniption.

He heard May sigh, as if the answer wasn't satisfying, but she knew it was the only one she was
going to get. "\textit{If you say so...}"

Once they were sure she was gone again, Ned spoke: "But wait, if it's really Mia, why would she
hide from the camera?"

"I don't know." Peter admitted, which was the truth. There was nothing else he could respond with
to Ned's rising doubt.

He couldn't even begin to fathom what might have really happened to Mia. But intuition told him
that something must be wrong, for her to be alive this whole time, but missing… and how no one but
he and Ned knew about it. All he could think about was the bruises on that hand; a hand that had to
be Mia's.

The first tiny sign of life he saw of her, and she was hurt. "She sent you a message she knew only I'd
be able to figure out. She could've just said straight out she was alive to you, but didn't. Something
must be going on, Ned. Something bad."

"What do you mean?" Ned asked, raising an eyebrow. "You think she's afraid of something?"

"Or someone," Peter glanced back at the laptop. "This is the second message she sent me in three
weeks, not counting the weird phone call I got. She used something like a code each time. The first
time, she said she was in Sokovia. A few days later, civil war breaks out in Sokovia's capital city,
and we get a crazy \textit{TIME} article a week after about superpowered teenage rebels. Then just
yesterday, France was attacked, and now we're getting another message from Mia. It can't be a
coincidence."
Ned was silent for a long moment. A line formed between his brow as he battled with his inner thoughts. His next words were cautious, almost scared. "Peter, France was attacked by terrorists. The Ten Rings. Are you saying she's involved somehow?"

The thought was almost too daunting to consider. How could Mia, the small, sickly girl who never did anything worse beyond sneaking out of the house for some ice-cream, his best friend, his wingwoman, wound up tied to several violent(!) international incidents and terrorist organizations? But Peter was having a hard time believing anything else.

"Yes." Peter eventually said, knowing he wasn't going to like Ned's pinched expression, the sharp breath. "I don't know how. But it's been two years. A lot can happen in two years."

Confirming it meant they both had to acknowledge and act on that belief. It meant that they were heading in a direction that none of them wanted, ever expected to go in.

There was a certain irony to it, though. Mia was alive, but at the cost of some phantom danger revolving around her.

Ned took a deep breath, closing his eyes as he steeled his nerves, then nodded slowly. It seemed he couldn't see any other option, either. "Okay. Okay, I can handle that. Mia's an international fugitive, she fought in a civil war and she may or may not have helped explode a boat. Totally normal coming-of-age story. What now?"

"What now?" Peter repeated, equally confused. He had no idea what to do. It wasn't like he could find Mia — she was keeping her location a secret for a reason. "I guess we wait. We wait for the next sign."

"And how we will know what it is?"

Peter could only shrug. "We'll know it when we see it."

November 10th, 2012

8:12 AM

London was attacked early that next morning.

Not that Peter was aware of this at the time. Morning in London was still middle of the night in New York City. The sun had not yet reached their shores, but the news would be waiting when it did.

Normally, on weekends, Peter would sleep in until ten or later. Today, however, he found himself wide awake at 7:19 AM (according to his StarkPhone), and unable to close his eyes for longer than five minutes. He tried so hard to go back to sleep — Ned was still snoring away above him in the top bunk, and there was absolutely nothing to do at this hour. But Peter couldn't relax. He knew something was wrong, before ever knowing why.
This notion nagged at him mercilessly. It was akin to the feeling when you're sitting in the hospital, awaiting news from the doctor, but not knowing who was hurt or how it happened — and you were absolutely helpless in the entire matter.

Eventually Peter found this strange, tense boredom unbearable, so he rose from his bed. Leaving Ned behind to dream in peace, he shuffled into the kitchen, the chill of the tiles seeping through his socks — starting to regret this decision, and maybe just go back to his warm bed — when Peter noticed May was in the living room, utterly silent in front of the TV.

"May?" He said, voice echoing thinly, hollow across the room.

She didn't respond. Maybe didn't hear him. Drawing nearer, all Peter could see was the back of her head, dark hair pulled up into a messy bun. She was hunched forward on the couch, a mug of coffee in her hands.

"May?" Peter asked again.

That's when he finally looked at the TV screen.

Really looked at it.

Smoke and fire engulfing the identical towers of London's iconic bridge. The gaping, jagged hole torn through the center of the structure, the wreckage of the steamer ship beyond. Shots of stunned citizens, rushing police cars, a caravan of fire trucks, lines and lines of ambulances darting in and out of the surrounding streets. Helicopters circling helplessly, their rotors tossing the thick smoke away.

Nothing but still, awful silence as he and May watched in shared horror.

The voice of the BBC anchor filtered through to Peter's ears only after he took this all in: "...the number of casualties is still unknown. But Scotland Yard has officially confirmed the initial crash of the ship was caused through a mechanical failure. The drawbridge was sabotaged so it would fail to rise in time, resulting in the catastrophic collision you see here. Two separate bombs were detonated at the same time, trapping the civilians caught in the center of the bridge. Immediately after, a helicopter arrived, and released what appear to be rogue combatants, as you can see from this footage taken from a civilian phone camera. The image is too far away to identify anyone, although rumors persist that civilians fought back, but no one matching their descriptions were apprehended by the police. As of yet, no one has claimed responsibility, but the Prime Minister has confirmed this to be a deliberate act of terror. Our sources say that the Ten Rings may be involved — this only recently after the bombings in Nice, France. We will keep you updated as the situation develops…"

"What happened?" Peter whispered, as though he hadn't just listened to the anchor. But he didn't want to hear it from him.

Was this it? Peter wondered to himself. Was this the next sign?

And his second thought: When was this all going to end?

It didn't matter that it was in another city, another country. It still felt too close, too raw. It was only this spring that New York was attacked again — buildings toppled, people killed, helpless mangled emotions besieging the populace.

Aunt May jumped, pivoting around on the spot to take in Peter. Her hand flew to her chest as she gasped, "Oh, Peter! You scared me."

"Sorry," Peter ducked his head in chagrin. He came down to sit next to May. Without a word, she
put an arm around his shoulder and pulled him in close. He didn't expect May to answer his question. It seemed unfair to expect her to know.

Still, May tucked his head under her chin, and sighed.

"It's been a long year," was all she said.

✮✮✮

November 13th, 2012

8:35 AM

Peter wasn't sure he'd ever get another message after that. It occurred to him, after the attack on London, that whatever danger Mia was in might catch up to her before she ever got home.

He didn't want to let go of his hope so soon. He didn't want to lose faith in Mia's tenacity.

He was afraid he didn't have a choice.

By the time Monday came around, and no further word from Mia (or what he believed to be her), Peter had just about given up on the idea. Maybe he was crazy, for believing so hard. Maybe it was normal, to deny it, even to this point, to believe that somehow the crazy happenings in Europe had anything to do with his dead cousin — as if it were any evidence that she was somehow still alive.

Anyone, anyone who wasn't Ned, would've told Peter he was being delusional.

Maybe it was time to accept the truth.

Then he got an email during AP Physics.

Well, it popped up in his inbox last night, but Peter didn't get a chance to look at it until he opened up his laptop during First Period, right after the bell rang. Looking at email was fine during class, so long as the teacher wasn't speaking, so Peter took the opportunity to look at it.

His heart skipped a beat when he read the address line.

Ozornoy7999

Goose.

Ned had just flopped in the seat next to him when Peter practically smashed the keypad to open the email. "Hey, dude, what's up?"

Peter didn't hear him. All he could do was stare at the message Mia had left him.

Ned poked him in the shoulder. "Hey, are you all right, Peter? What're you looking at?"
Peter could barely move. A part of him was too stunned to speak. Mia was still alive! She sent him another message! And, like clockwork, it appeared right after another disaster.

"Peter?" Ned prompted again, before peeking at his screen. "Why are you staring at a picture of John F. Kennedy?"

All he could do was turn his head, eyes wide towards Ned. His words were a hoarse whisper. "It's from Mia."

"Holy shit!" Ned said, then slapped a hand over his mouth and ducked down before Mrs. Fleming could pick out who said it. In a lower register, behind his hand, Ned repeated, "Holy shit! For real? What else does it say?"

"Nothing," Peter said, a frown pulling down at his mouth as he scrolled down the email, to find nothing but the word 'Goose' typed as her callsign. "That's it. She just sent me a picture of this guy. But I have no idea what it's supposed to mean."

"It's not another reference to a movie?" Ned asked, frowning. At the front of the class, Mrs. Fleming began drawing a schematic on the whiteboard, along with an equation.

Peter was only half-paying attention. He said, "No, not that I can think of. Most of the stuff we watched were from the 80's, or later. Nothing with JFK."

"Well, Mia got pretty good grades in history class," Ned pointed out. "Maybe it's her favorite president?"

"Her favorite president is Theodore Roosevelt," Peter said absentmindedly. "Even if it was Kennedy, it still wouldn't tell me what she meant by it. What does it have to do with her getting home? Maybe...maybe there's something famous in Europe, named after him? Since that's where she is, if she's still alive."

"I can't think of anything," Ned could only shake his head, brow knit in frustration. "I don't know, man, are you sure it's Mia? That's not her email."

"She made it three weeks ago," Peter said, starting to feel like he was treading water. This might be the last message he got from Mia in a while, and he couldn't figure it out. Why was she being so vague? "She's afraid of something, remember? Probably knows whoever's after her would be monitoring her old accounts."

"Okay, fair enough," Ned said, nodding to himself. He didn't speak for a moment when Mrs. Fleming faced the class with a question. He waited until it was answered before speaking in an undertone again, "It's gotta be a code, right? Maybe something that spells JFK. Like, uh, I don't know... Jet-Propelled False Kilometers? Nah. Well, she's into coding, so maybe... Java Format Kernel? No, that doesn't make any sense —"

"Is there something interesting you'd like to share with the class, Ned?" Mrs. Fleming called, making Ned shoot straight up in his seat, red in the face. She cocked an eyebrow at him. "I hope I'm not straining your attention."


"Hmph," Mrs. Fleming gave him one last disapproving look before continuing with her lecture. Ned sat with his hands under his desk, properly shushed, and unwilling to speak again without testing Mrs. Fleming's patience.
Peter frowned, studying the image again. Maybe Mia hid something in the pixels itself, some hidden message in Kennedy's face or something…

His thoughts were interrupted when a paper airplane bounced off his temple. Irritated, he whipped around to glare at whoever did that, already guessing it to be Flash ready with some stupid new nickname he just invented —

But instead, it was Michelle, sitting two seats behind him. She wiggled her fingers at him, leaning forward in her seat. From her vantage point, she would've been able to spy on Peter's computer.

"What is it?" Peter hissed out of the corner of his mouth, wondering what she could want. He really wasn't in the mood for Michelle's sarcastic commentary on life.

"The airport." Michelle said, and when he just gave her a confused look, she raised her eyebrows at him. "You know, JFK International? That's what you two dorks are talking about, right?"

Peter blinked, confounded. "The airport?" He repeated dumbly.

"Oh, c'mon," Michelle rolled her eyes, tilting her head in annoyance. "I don't really have to explain this to another New Yorker. You know what JFK is."

"JFK," Peter said, and before Michelle could think of something else to say, he whipped back around to stare at the Kennedy's portrait. "Kennedy airport…Oh my god, that's it! That's what's she's trying to tell me!"

"What?" Ned, Michelle, and Mrs. Fleming asked at the same time.

Peter had said it loud enough that the whole class had heard, and every head turned when he suddenly leapt out of his seat, hands on his head. A few kids started to whisper, snickering behind their hands.

"What's wrong?" Ned asked, but there was no time to answer him. Peter had to get out of here now.

"Peter, sit down!" Mrs. Fleming admonished, but Peter had already slammed his laptop shut and was currently shoving it into his backpack. "And no shouting in — wait, where do you think you're going?"

"Sorry, Mrs. Fleming!" Peter called, slinging his backpack over one shoulder before scrambling for the exit. Thanks to his disruption, the class erupted with noise, as he hopped and slid over the corner of a desk. "It's a family emergency!"

"Peter, stop! Get back here!" Mrs. Fleming called.

But Peter was already tearing out the door.

✮✮✮
November 13th

10:13 AM

It took Peter over an hour to reach the JFK airport. This was mostly due to the fact of awful traffic and weather; normally he'd swing on over, but rain forced him to take the train instead — it was faster than having to go through all the traffic on the roads, although having to stop at Jamaica Station to board another line only made him all the more impatient.

He spent that time waiting doing calculations. The email had arrived very early that morning, before he had woken up. It was a good seven to eight hours later when he finally read it at school. If Mia had sent that before she boarded her flight, that meant was probably already in America by now. How long did an overseas flight take? Had she taken a nonstop flight, or took one with a layover to throw off anyone that was following her?

It was impossible to know. Peter kept looking at the email on his StarkPhone just to remind himself that this was real. This was too real. It had to be real.

"Sir, may I remind you that skipping school like this will likely result in disciplinary punishment?"
"And that an exemplary record is necessary to remain in the employ of Stark Industries?"

"I don't even get paid," Peter muttered into his scarf, keeping an eye out for any passerby as he crossed the station. He felt self-conscious talking to his phone, even though most people would probably assume he was making a call. "And it's not even a real internship. Besides, I think Mr. Stark will understand, you know, once I tell him what happened."

"Was it wise to keep him in the dark about your search for your deceased cousin?"

"She's not deceased!" Peter said, annoyed, especially with the word choice. "I've got proof she's still alive. And, if what I think is true, then I'll know for sure."

"It's an unlikely possibility that John F. Kennedy's portrait would mean the location of Amelia's arrival," his phone said. "The odds of Amelia actually being at Kennedy Airport is approximately one-point-two-million to —"

"Never tell me the odds!" Peter snapped, glaring at his phone as if it would have any emotional reaction to it. "I'm nearly there already, it's too late now. The best you could do for me right now is hack into their security feeds and see if you find anyone that looks like Mia."

"I'm afraid that illegal access of the Kennedy Airport security system is not included in my protocols, Mr. Parker," his phone said, and it even sounded apologetic. The wonders of coding.

Just when Peter was about to express his frustration, the phone added: "I can tell you, however, that an international flight from London landed five minutes ago at Terminal 3, Gate B1."

Peter came to an abrupt stop. "Are you sure?"

"Positive. Would you like me to map you a route towards that location?"

"Yes, do it now!" Peter nearly shouted, breaking out into a sprint as he headed towards the nearest exit. "I'm already on the move!"

The OS determined a path almost instantly, and guided him through verbal commands — Peter didn't
have the time to keep glancing at his phone. Mia might already be deboarding right now. He had to keep his eyes out in case she was somewhere in the crowd.

JFK International Airport was massive, but Peter was a fast runner, and his superhuman endurance meant he wasn't going to tire out anytime soon. He made it to Terminal 3 in just under a minute and a half.

Only one problem. Bursting through the doors of Terminal 3, Peter charged up the steps, skipping past the escalators entirely, and at a full-tilt sprint, suddenly slammed to a complete halt. Fifty feet in front of him were the security gates and a massive line of people and over two dozen TSA agents. The electronic boards hanging from the ceiling said it would take over 45 minutes to get through screenings.

There was no way he was getting to Gate B1.

His eyes scanned desperately for a way around. There had to be a visitor's entrance, right? A place to greet people who just landed here? Peter honestly had no idea. He'd never been in an airport before. He'd never even been in a plane.

Peter spun in place, trying to figure out what to do. Stark's OS had a rare glitch, telling Peter to go through TSA even though he had no ticket, no reason to be there. He didn't have the time to correct her. His heart was pounding, his thoughts racing a mile a minute.

Mia had to be here. Where would she go next? How could he find her?

That's when he heard shouting.

It was distant at first, drowned out by the general hubbub and the acoustics of the high ceiling of the main lobby. But then agents from the screening line broke away, several jumping over the velvet rope to go deal with something on the far right, responding to calls on their radios.

"Oof!" Peter got shoulder-checked by a security guard coming in front behind, racing towards an intersection where the food courts led to the baggage pick-up.

Stumbling a little to catch himself, Peter tried to peer over the shoulders of other curious onlookers, but he was too short.

Annoyed that being bitten by a spider didn't make him at least three inches taller, Peter began forcing his way through the crowd, ducking under arms and leaping over carry-ons, following the commotion towards a suspended walkway, glass windows giving view of the airfield beyond.

Civilians had been pushed to the side by the security force, alarmed by the sudden urgency of the area.

Running down the walkway, Peter didn't see anything at first, and started to wonder if maybe it was a false alarm, or completely unrelated — all US airports would be on high alert after the London attack, maybe the TSA was just being paranoid as usual —

The walkway split into two directions. The security team charged down one way. Peter skidded to a stop, unable to see what they were going after. The little snatches of radio chatter he caught sounded like they were responding to a call for help at another location, not actually chasing anyone.

Damn it. Peter huffed, running a hand through his hair as he turned back the way he came. Was it all a mistake? Was he even in the right place? The airport was just so huge. He'd never have enough time to search it all…
In the background someone yelped, simultaneous to the noise of a heavy suitcase crashing to the tile floor, echoing sharply.

"Hey, careful!" A woman cried, followed by the sound of a quick apology, the rustle of clothes and panting breath. Peter glanced over his shoulder. Some girl had just run into a woman, and was already stumbling away, looking haggard and a little manic. Well, someone was in a rush.

The girl came to a stop at the center of the intersection, staring up the signs one at a time, squinting as if she were having trouble reading them. She was tall and gangly, wearing only a thin green canvas jacket, unsuitable for the weather, and carrying only a single small backpack over one shoulder. Bruised knuckles gripped the strap.

Peter was just about to turn away, uninterested with harried travelers, when his eyes rose to her face. She had a rather unsightly thick bandage taped just above her right eye. But the bandage wasn't what stopped him — no, it was the rest of her.

The girl was way too tall, first of all; she had to be almost six feet, if not over. The blonde hair was cut too short, uneven and just above her shoulders. The face a little too wide, too old, the cheekbones not as prominent, cheeks too pink. There were cuts and bruises he'd never seen before. Freckles, too.

But those gray eyes didn't change.

Peter's breath hitched in his throat.

"Mia?"

The girl snapped her head around, looked at the one who called out. Her gaze found his. Her eyes widened. Too wide.

There she was standing before him, looking nothing like the Mia he knew. But it was still her face. Peter would know it anywhere.

For the longest second, they just stood there, staring at each other. Mia's mouth was open — breathing hard, maybe about to say something. He stepped forward, reaching out with a hand. To touch her. To make sure she was real.

Peter took another step forward, slow, almost too afraid to move. The girl seemed frozen, like a deer in headlights, unable to break away. He felt light-headed, maybe even a little dizzy, like the world was suddenly going to spin away from him at any moment, and he'd wake up in his bed, and realize that this was just some cruel, cruel dream, a last-ditch attempt at wish-fulfillment.

"Mia?" He said again. Somehow, she wasn't responding. Like she hadn't heard him. Through his shock, he almost started to smile.

Her gaze dropped down, following his hand. That's when he noticed the trail of blood slipping down from her nose. He was three feet away. Mia twitched, her stance shifting, now on the balls of her feet.

Their eyes met again. Something flickered in her eyes. She knew him. Mia. She had to be.

Then she turned, and ran.
art by me :) (Mia in her Crucible suit)
Chapter Summary

[Part Five: Ashes to Ashes]
Finally home, Amelia struggles to adapting to homelife, harboring secrets and missing all those things she left behind. New York City is not as she remembered it.
Neither is Peter, her oldest friend. Is he hiding secrets, too? Can she find a normal place where she belongs in this strange new world?

--
You Are My Sunshine // The Civil Wars
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ibENEQXnP_E

Chapter Notes

Thanks for staying with this fic for so long guys! I know we still got a ways to go, so I’m doing my best not to lose any steam, even though the action will be toned down a bit now that Mia is home.

Anyways, I want to give special thanks to Musical Bear and Aurora02, who always have helpful reviews, and points out plotholes so I can go back and write them out ;P
My first instinct was to shoot out of my seat.

But immediately after I rose, a wave of dizziness washed over me. Before I could overcome it, Brandt grabbed my sleeve and yanked me back down.

"Where do you think you're going?" Brandt said, and I spotted her smirk as the world spun around me. Was I even sitting anymore? It felt like the jet was spiraling into a nosedive, even though we hadn't even started moving yet. "The plane's about to take off in ten minutes. You don't want to miss your ride home, do you?"

"What...did you do...to me?" My words fell like wet, heavy bricks out of my mouth. Sounds warped, turning the stewardess going over safety procedures into an off-tune foghorn.

"It's called ketamine," Brandt's voice echoed somewhere from the ether. I could feel the drowsiness pulling me away from reality, into the false comfort of sleep. "A concentrated version of it, at least, more effective on folks like you and me. Typically used as an anesthetic or sedative in most medical procedures. Side effects include double vision, nausea, hallucinations, irregular heartbeat...some things you're probably experiencing right now, I imagine."

Well, she wasn't wrong. The jet shifted into a backwards motion and my stomach did flips. I almost wanted to vomit, but my body had gone completely limp — I couldn't operate my gag reflex even if I wanted to. Closing my eyes didn't help much, but at least the world stopped rocking like a carnival ride. It didn't get rid of the sensation that I was sitting in one of Disneyland's spinning teacups ride.

In the distance, I heard an unfamiliar voice speak. A shadow at the corner of my vision when I dared peek out from beneath my eyelids. I saw the white shirt and blue skirt of the stewardess, asking Brandt a question. I couldn't make it out, only Brandt's answer.

"...oh, my niece, she'll be fine...not feeling well, gets airsick...."

I closed my eyes, pressed my lips together. Frustration. I was trapped on a plane with an Extremis soldier. No one suspected a thing.

And so soon after escaping the Crucible. I was still getting over the flashbacks of my first escape. How Brandt, Savin, the other Extremis agents tried to stop me. I sort of understood why she might hate me so much now.

During debrief, I never told Coulson my full experience when I helped rescue his team. Not that they were idiots, they probably knew I was going through something at the time, but I didn't tell any of them how easily suppressed memories could be triggered. That I was brainwashed, that I had a trigger phrase. Simmons’ name Rebel Columbia still gave me shivers when I thought about it. Not that they could ever know. Give all of SHIELD the idea that I could be controlled against my will? I don't think so.

"Thought you were...dead..." I muttered, and I kind of liked how I sounded more annoyed than
scared. An unintentional effect of the ketamine, perhaps.

"Hmm, you'd think so, right?" Brandt seemed mildly amused by the question. "But no, no, you're gonna have to try a lot harder than an avalanche if you want to kill me. Speaking of death —" I felt a hand slide behind my head, before it fisted into my hair, jerked my head back. The pain was sharp, clear, bright against the dullness of the sedative. I winced, opening my eyes, and met Brandt eye-to-eye. "— It seems the KGB wasn't so lucky. Tell me, Amelia, how is it that almost everyone who knew your trigger is dead now? I mean; besides a select few individuals, I don't think anyone's left. The rest have bullets in their head, or got crushed under the Crucible. And I'm sure as hell you're not smart enough to pull that off on your own."

I blinked, frowning in confusion. It took a second for me to catch up with all of those words. Agents...dead? Oh, right. The Winter Soldier. They still had no idea that he fired on his own guys.

I was only vaguely aware of the jet taking off — my only clue was the popping in my ears and the shift backwards in my seat from the g-force.

"I don't know," I said, my lips dry. I licked them, focusing hard on what I wanted to say so I didn't forget in the soft fogginess of my mind. "Why don't you ask your boss, the Chairman?"

"He isn't my boss," Brandt said, settling into her seat as the jet rose to cruising level. She was completely relaxed, in control of the situation. "But the man I work for was specific about this. Doesn't want any more casualties than necessary. I don't know how you got rid of all those KGB agents, but let me be clear — Unless you want 9/11 Part Two, refrain from pulling any stunts while on board."

I glared at her as Brandt smiled, delighted in her own threat. I suspected she had no problem blowing up this plane. She'd probably survive that, too.

"Who...else...knows?" I asked. My mind slipped away from me for a moment. Sunlight flickered in the window to my right. The vast blue Atlantic hung below the jet's wing.

Thankfully, Brandt didn't need clarification. "Me, Savin — the only ones the Chairman trusted to keep you in line. The Chairman has the Glass Presence. Fancy codename for the book with all the secrets to your head. Only one exists, had it made when you were finished programming."

"And you're just...telling me this...?"

"Sure, why not. Ketamine also induces amnesia when it wears off. And I don't plan on keeping you sober for long. It's either drugs or protocol for you."

"Why don't you use it now?" I asked, a whisper. I didn't know how many people were on board, how many were close enough to hear. I was still trying to parse through an escape plan, but I kept coming to dead ends.

"Well, it'd be pointless and all. You being all doped up like a street whore," Brandt replied, shrugging casually. "Not much use to me or my boss that way. Besides, you act a lot more suspicious when you're, you know, under protocol. We'd never make it past US security. Keeping you sedated is more convenient. And I've got enough doses for the next twelve hours," Brandt patted my arm in what might been a reassuring manner, but was, in fact, completely unnerving. "So, you've got nothing to worry about. It's a long flight, maybe you should get some shut-eye."

I didn't have a lot of options. I didn't have the energy to fight. Much less think. The vibrations of the jet, the dull roar of the engines left a ringing in my ears that I couldn't shake. My hearing got funkier
the higher we got and the more they popped. Voices turned muted; the cabin went dark as we headed west and the sun shifted behind us. I felt like I was floating — it wasn't an unfamiliar sensation. I've woken up like this in hospitals. A part of my mind was convinced I was lying in a soft gurney, pillow and blankets covering me, muffling all the harsh reality of the world.

I must have drifted, because I was woken by another sharp pinch, this time inside my elbow. I looked down to see Brandt inserting another needle in my skin, deftly hidden by a well-placed bag in her lap. To the uninformed observer, it looked like Brandt was rummaging around for something.

For three whole seconds, I was fully alert. The last dose had worn off. How long had it been? An hour? Two?

Then the lullaby of ketamine dragged me under again, and I sagged back into my seat.

Awake again, I uttered a curse. For a second, I had this crazy idea that I could break away while the drug wore off. But the idea came too late, and Brandt was far more lucid than I could ever be.

"Language, cupcake," Brandt cooed, patting me on the arm as if I were having a tantrum. As the world turned fuzzy again, I watched as her scars blended into the rest of her face. "Remember what I said about misbehaving?"

I rolled my eyes, my head falling back against the seat, groaning quietly. "Just shoot me."

"Don't think I don't want to," Brandt sighed. "But apparently you have a record of surviving double-taps to the back, so why waste the effort? As much as I'd love to throttle you, you're still useful to the guys who give me my paycheck."

I took me five minutes to process that. Or it felt like five minutes. My conception of time wasn't exactly on the up-and-up, among other things. "So... you're saying you're a mercenary? Not KGB?"

"Do I sound KGB to you?" Brandt scoffed, then shook her head and laughed. There was no humor in it. "I used to be U.S. Army."

"Army..." I murmured, mulling over the word. "What happened?"

Brandt tilted her head at me, a line forming between her brow. "Why do you care?"

I just shrugged, making a face. It felt weird. Half of my face was numb. "Dunno... Curious. You can just g-go back to threatening me, if you want."

She snorted, but apparently that was good enough for her, so she said, "You're a real smartass, you know that? Fine. I served. Lost an arm for the trouble." She wiggled the fingers of her left hand at me. "Honorable discharge but no compensation. Then someone came up to me, offered me money and my arm back — I said yes. A few years later, and here I am, babysitting an overgrown child."

"I assume... you turned into a psychopath somewhere during that time,"

"Who said I wasn't one the whole time?" Brandt whispered, cocking an eyebrow. She grinned. "Now I just get paid for it."

It was hard to argue with that. I turned my head away, facing the window, unable to look at her anymore. I wanted to think. Instead, I fell asleep again.

Nine hours was fairly long for a flight. It felt a lot longer with ketamine and a constant fear of your life (along with everyone else's). In the twilight stage between drugged wakefulness and drugged
sleep, I tried to formulate a way to tell the flight crew that they were in trouble. But in every scenario Brandt found out, and each one ended with everyone dying.

I couldn't do anything on this plane. I had to wait.

I didn't have a watch, and drugged I couldn't refer to my internal clock. The sun remained behind us almost the entire time. We left London in the morning, to arrive to morning in America.

The only way I could tell time was when Brandt gave me another injection. As far as I could tell, she gave them at regular intervals. I drifted off a few times, but when I felt the needle again, I remembered my count. Seven. Seven shots of ketamine. At least six hours. We had passed the halfway point of the trip a while ago. I was only vaguely aware of my growling stomach, but I couldn't even lift my arms.

"Aren't you going to do something?"

My head snapped up, breath catching in my throat. The voice came from my left. To the empty aisle seat next to Brandt.

Only it wasn't empty anymore.

Peter leaned over to give me a quizzical look. "Come on, Mia. You're in danger. Brandt's going to kill someone if you don't do something."

"I can't," I told him. Couldn't he see the state I was in? Didn't he understand how dangerous Brandt was? "I can't do anything. What are you even doing here? Shouldn't you be home?"

Peter tilted his head, his smile too serene for the current situation. "I got those messages you sent, remember? Did you really think I wasn't going to look for my wing-woman?"

"B-but how…?"

"Don't worry about it, Goose." Peter said. "You gotta come up with a plan. You always have a plan. So how are you going to get out of this one?"

A headache was forming behind my eyes. Closing them, I frowned. A part of me knew it wasn't possible that I was seeing Peter right now, but he looked so real. The silly geek shirts, the black-frame glasses, the messy hair. His voice was like it was right next to me. He was the one person I needed right now.

Opening them again, I was both relieved and concerned to see him still sitting there. Peter cocked an eyebrow. "Well?"

I shrugged helplessly. "I'm sorry, Peter. I-I got nothing. I really want to go home, but I c-c-can't think through this fog…"

Peter just shook his head. "Come on, Mia, you're not trying hard enough. What would Ferris Bueller do?"

"Ferris Bueller?" I repeated, utterly bewildered. I squinted, trying to follow Peter's line of thinking. My brain grappled with recalling memories through the fog. The...the movie? We had watched it, what, three years ago? I was having a hard time remembering what even happened in it. Referencing Eighties movies wasn't weird for Peter, but I didn't see how it was supposed to be helpful. "Peter, I don't think that's really applicable —"
"Ferris Bueller's Day Off is always applicable!" Peter said brightly, still smiling. "Think about it! What starts off the whole plot of the movie?"

"H-he skips school to hang out with his friends."

"And how does he manage that?"

"By calling in sick…" My words trailed off as I finally figured out what Peter meant. "Oh, I get it now!"

"See? That wasn't too hard," Peter said, grinning now that I understood.

"Hey!" Suddenly, fingers snapped in my face, making me jolt. Brandt leaned forward, blocking Peter from view. She was scowling, looking me up and down. "What're you mumbling about? There's no one there."

"W-what?" I blinked, startled and confused. When Brandt moved back, I saw that the aisle seat was empty again.

Peter was never here. "O-oh…"

"God, you're hallucinating," Brandt just rolled her eyes, shaking her head. With one hand, she shoved me against the cabin wall. My head conked off the fiberglass. "Just go back to sleep and stop bothering me. We're almost there."

My head spinning, I decided not to argue. Peter's words still rang in my head, and a part of me was still debating what I saw. Had he really been there? Did he really think I could get out of this?

✮✮✮

It wasn't even noon when we landed.

Brandt supported me, one arm at my back, one holding my elbow, like she was just ushering her sick niece off the plane. Her coat and bag deftly hid the needle she held just under my ribcage, a silent threat in case I acted out. I barely remembered to grab my own bag before she pulled me out of my seat.

The world tilted oddly beneath me for a few minutes before I finally found my balance. By then, we had left the plane, and were heading through to the baggage-claim.

I didn't think Brandt had a weapon on her — how would she have gotten it through the initial security check in London? Of course, maybe it was made of plastic or something. She got that ketamine through somehow; I was pretty sure it was illegal to bring controlled substances across borders like that.

Of course, Brandt herself was a weapon. It probably didn't make much difference to her whether she blew up a jet or an airport.

There were so many people here. Noise echoed, tinny, off the high walls and ceilings. We passed white columns and rows of benches, kiosks and service desks. A garbled voice filtered through the PA system. Every twenty feet there seem to be a security guard on watch.
I made eye contact with one of them, then quickly looked away again.

I wondered if SHIELD was still monitoring me right now. They probably weren't watching that closely, if this happened and no interference had occurred yet. They probably thought I was still fine.

It just told me what I already knew. That I shouldn't get too comfortable with having back-up. That I was on my own again.

It took about five minutes to reach baggage claim. Brandt took her time. There was no rush, and I had no idea what she had planned for once we reached the outside. If she didn't get me with another needle, and if we got through customs without incident, then that would be the best time to get away. There would be a lot less people in the parking lot.

If I made it that far.

I was finally on American soil, and I was in more danger than ever. The irony didn't miss me.

Baggage claim was on the floor below. We took the escalator. Half-way down, I glanced behind me. About twelve people behind, just getting on, was the security guard I saw earlier.

I swayed unsteadily as I turned around again, gripped the rubber railing of the escalator. It was fairly high, could make someone dizzy. Annoyed, Brandt jerked me back, hissing a warning, before we stepped off the elevator.

I ducked my head, said nothing. We passed through baggage-claim without stopping. Not surprisingly. I didn't think Brandt was the type of person to bring checked luggage.

Customs was straight ahead. People lining up, sacrificing their bags for search of illicit materials. It occurred to me that Brandt couldn't keep the needle on me forever. She'd have to let go for the security check. And an empty syringe was much less suspicious than a full one.

I realized I couldn't wait until I got outside. I'd be under ketamine again before we reached the doors. I had to do something now.

But could I risk it? Anything I did could provoke Brandt into turning red-hot. But maybe she was bluffing. She kept me alive this long, after all. Whoever she was taking me to now must have considered me valuable.

I spotted another guard ahead, maybe ten meters. Glanced up at domed security mirror in one corner. The first guard was still following us.

My gaze dropped down. Customs were close. Too close. We'd reach the line in less than a minute. Brandt still had the needle at my side. She didn't know the last dose had worn off thirty minutes ago.

It wasn't hard to fake being sick. I had spent my entire life with the real thing. Maybe Ferris Bueller was onto something.

I stumbled again. Tripped over my own feet. Brandt grunted, caught my weight, hefted me back.

I used that momentum to slam the point of my elbow into her gut.

"Oof!" The sound of air leaving Brandt's lungs was audible, loud in my ear.
I lifted my arm up and around her right shoulder, grabbing her wrist. In one move, I snapped her arm straight and twisted — the needle in her grip went flying.

But she recovered fast. I still had her arm in a lock when Brandt drove her fist under my right arm, at the base of my ribcage. Something cracked and I gasped, reeling away. I stumbled for real this time, the world spinning wildly for a moment. Maybe the ketamine hadn't worn off as much as I thought.

I saw Brandt's foot a second before it came for my face. I ducked just in time, raising up my hands to protect my face. I absorbed her next blow.

She snarled something I didn't catch. Probably cursing me again. Brandt lunged at me, grabbed me by the shoulders and tried throwing me to the floor. I kept my arms up against my chest, trying to push out against her hold as she scrambled for another syringe in her bag.

Remembering there were dozens of eyes on us and figuring it couldn't hurt, I cried out, "Help! Help me! I don't know her! She's trying to kidnap me!"

"Shut up!" Brandt hissed, jerking me back.

Shouts came from either side of us, people crying out in alarm. The security guards I saw earlier were rushing in fast, hands on their radios. More were organizing at the customs station. Pushing people out of the way, to safety, when they realized how violent it was getting.

My back was pressed against her shoulder. I couldn't throw her off. The first security guard reached us. He was pulling a taser from his belt.

At the same time, Brandt finally yanked a syringe out of her bag.

Before she could jab it into my neck, I lifted both my legs. The security guard had gotten too close, trying to get an angle on Brandt. But it was close enough for me.

I slammed my feet into his chest. He cried out, thrown back — Brandt and I went in the other direction, unbalanced by the sudden force of my kick.

I fell hard on top of Brandt. The second syringe skittered across the tile. I rolled over, recovered first. Scrambled for it as it bounced off a potted plant.

My fingers were an inch away before Brandt grabbed my ankle and yanked me back. "No!"

I twisted around as Brandt's other hand clawed my shin — her face was completely open for the heel of my other foot. Her head snapped to the side, then the other when I kicked her again. Her grip loosened just a smidge.

But I wasn't fast enough. Her hands were burning now. Eyes glowing red. I tried to get up, but she was faster, jumped on top of me, pinned me down.

A scorching hand gripped my face, pressed my cheek into the floor. I was shaking all over, adrenaline burning through ketamine. I tried to buck her off, crying out when her skin burned mine.

She leaned over, and whispered into my ear. "Бунтарь Колумбия Стремящийся девяносто —"

*Buntar Kolumbiya Stremyashchiysya Devyanosto*

"No!" I cried again, struggling against her, panting and whimpering, doing whatever I could to stop her. "No, please! Stop!"
She was speaking so fast. My arms were pinned. Couldn't move. *Stop stop stop*

"— баюкать марионетка четыре —"

*Bayukat Marionetka Chetyhree*

But it wasn't working. I couldn't drown her out.


"— Начало Золото—"

*Nachalo Zoloto.*

World spinning again. Going numb. *That's not me that's not me that's not me —*

The last word.

Brandt smiled. "Алхимия."

*Alkhimiya.*

My breath stopped. Everything went cold.

Brandt's smile ended with a shriek.

She convulsed, recoiled, rolled off. Two strands of thin, curly wires were attached to her back. Directly behind her stood the second security guard, hands gripping his taser, eyes wide and teeth gritted.

But then Brandt picked herself up, raised her arm over her head. With a grimace, she yanked off the electrified barbs, as the guard was still pulling the trigger. He gaped, horror dawning across his face, as she slowly stood up, the veins in her arms and face glowing bright.

"What the fu —"

Brandt lunged for him.

The guard stumbled back, throwing up his arms when she smacked the taser right out of his hands. A second guard rushed in to his aid — only for Brandt to take him by the front of his shirt and send him flying against a column. He fell to the ground in a heap.

The tiles at her feet started to melt beneath her. *Stop her.*

People screaming. Civilians rushing in every direction, running for their lives. Luggage abandoned. An alarm blared overhead. It seemed sudden, but perhaps it had been there the whole time, since the fight started.

Brandt delivered a kick to the guard's knee. He dropped, received a blow to the face, falling back. Somehow, still conscious, nose bleeding, he scrambled back, as Brandt loomed over him.

She had a wicked smile that said she would enjoy the next part.

Brandt raised her arm, hand white-hot. The guard flinched, arms going up to protect his face.

But the blow never came. He froze, then lowered his arms, squinting at his attacker.
Brandt had gone completely rigid, her eyes widening in shock. Heat dimming, her arm dropped. The rest of her body followed, crumpling to the door with a thump, limp as a ragdoll.

The guard stared at me, with the empty syringe in my hand. I stared back. *Objective complete.*

His radio crackled. Footsteps incoming. At least a dozen. Guards at the customs finally got all the civilians safely away. It had taken them less than a minute.

Now they were coming for me.

*Escape.*

Brandt lay prone at my feet. She was saying something, just barely conscious. I didn't wait to hear it.

Before the guard could think of how to react, I leapt over him, straight for the incoming customs agents. They faltered, reaching for their weapons — none had them drawn before I barreled right through them. All six of them knocked away like bowling pins, unprepared for my strength.

Charged through the empty stations. Vaulted easily over the belted gates. Bypassed alarms. Every eye and camera on me.

*Exposed. Too exposed.*

Face burned. I caught my reflection in passing glass. Skin reddened, blistering. Would heal without permanent damage. It didn't matter. Injuries were not my priority.

*Cover blown. Get out. Regain anonymity before reaching next checkpoint.*


I spun around. Need another exit.

Down a walkway. Glass windows on either side. Passed other panicked civilians. They didn't seem scared of me. A pair of security guards came running down the other direction, directly towards me.

I skidded on my heels, ducking out of the way, shoulders back. Ready to engage.

But the guards passed without a second glance. They did not acknowledge me as a threat. They didn't know.


No. I didn't feel pain. It was irrelevant.

I watched the guards continue before disappearing behind more travelers. I turned around, and started to run.

A line of thought came crashing through my head.

*What is the checkpoint.*

*No orders no orders no orders —*

I came to a stop at the walkway intersection. Above me, signs, a map. Directions for exit. There was a camera, but no guards around. They were too busy gathering at the previous site. It wouldn't take them long to figure out what had happened to me.

*Escape escape escape.*

"Mia?"

A voice from nowhere.

A voice from deep inside my head.

A voice right next to me.

I spun around, alarmed. *Mia. Who is Mia.*

Him. The brown-eyed boy stood in front of me. Like from my dreams. Only he was real this time. He was here.

*Who is he.*

He was shorter than me, but perhaps the same age. Dark hair, pink cheeks recent from cold. Youthful, boyish face that still seemed old somehow. He wasn't wearing glasses.

*Imposter. A trick.*

No. It was the same boy, just older. Touched by something I couldn't see. There was a look in his eyes that I didn't comprehend. But I thought I should, somehow.

The civilian shouldn't be distracting me. I should be moving. But my feet were cemented to the spot. I couldn't take my eyes off the boy. His voice still echoed in my head. The name. The name.

*Why is that name so special to me. Who is Mia.*

"Mia?" the boy said again. This time, he stepped closer. He raised a hand, as if to touch me. As if I were just as unbelievable to him as he was to me.

*Who is he. Why does he look at me that way.*

A thought tickled at the back of my head. *I knew him.*

No. Impossible. I had no past. He was never a part of it.

And yet, he remained. Far more solid than I had ever conceived. A fragment of a dream, given life. He was never just a dream.

*I know him. And the Crucible does not.*

*The Crucible will kill him.*

Blood trickled down my face. I had to leave. I had to go…

Home.

I had to go home.

The boy's hand inches away. My breath froze in my throat. He would tell me who Mia was. He had
answers I wouldn't find elsewhere.

But it had to wait. My questions were irrelevant.

I had my next checkpoint.

Home.

So, I turned my back to him and ran.

✮✮✮

Home home home.

I was in a city. I knew its name, but I couldn't remember it. Names weren't important. All I knew were the streets. They held a strange familiarity to me. Like the brown-eyed boy. A dream of a dream, so solid at my feet.

I escaped the airport — John F. Kennedy, assassinated in 1963, Dallas, parade, Oswald framed, man on the grassy knoll — unharmed, unseen. Chaos is the friend of an assassin. And I learned from the best.

I had to go back. I had to get my orders. I wasn't allowed to be on my own for so long. Going AWOL would lead to punishment.

So would attacking a superior officer.

But I had no regrets for stopping Brandt. That went deeper than any sense of duty. I made the decision that she no longer held authority over me.

The Chairman wouldn't like that. But he wasn't here.

I knew I had to return to him. But I didn't want to. I tried to crush those rebellious thoughts. Disobedience would lead to punishment. But I didn't care.

I crossed a bridge over a wide river. On foot, I was harder to catch. Fewer cameras here. No security. Just many civilians, many cars. I thought about taking one, before I remembered I couldn't drive.

Where was I going?

A building. Pictured clearly in my head. Red brick building, dark windows, ten stories high. Its location was imprinted in my mind. I knew this city, even though I never recalled being here before.

This building. I knew it without knowing it. Home.

I should not be going there. The Chairman wouldn't want me to. But I didn't care. I had to go. I had nowhere else. I had to see —

Her face in my head, too. Like mine, but older. Blonde hair. Brown eyes. Wrinkles. A smile that I had to see again.

Mom.
She had to know I was still alive.

It took a little over two hours to reach it. Even on foot, I was fast. Underground metro helped. Skipped the turnstiles while the attendants weren't looking. It was busy at this hour. No one gave me a second look. They were too busy to notice the strange, bleeding girl with burns on her face, the intense look in her eye.

Then I was above-ground again. The day was overcast, gray. I didn't stop to drink or eat, even though I could feel my body asking for it. But this couldn't wait. I had to get home. I had to get home.

I had to find Mom.

I remembered the way, but not as it was now. Buildings in my memories were different. Some were cracked, damage in ways I didn't understand. The streets were in repair — I passed so many construction sites I lost count. In the distance, I saw Stark Tower amongst the skyline.

Only it was covered in scaffolding. The only part that remained of its original neon sign was a single "A" hanging over the city.

I turned my eyes back to the ground. Irrelevant. Had to find Mom. Home was right around the corner. I was practically running now. I was so close. So close. Mom would be home. She would be home when I arrived, and she would see that I was still alive and she wouldn't be sad anymore she wouldn't have to remember me like I had been in the ambulance, bleeding and dying —

The address was right across the street. I looked up, expecting to see lights in the windows, smoke from the chimneys.

Only to find that it was gone.

No.

I came to an abrupt stop, in the middle of the street. I shook my head, unable to comprehend what I saw.

In between two other complexes, where my home should be, was a just an empty, jagged black space. Like a tooth missing from the set of a jaw.

No no no no

This didn't make any sense. I had to have the wrong place. But the church with the green tower was at the end of the block, like it should be. The deli with the cat sign. The ice cream parlor with the striped canopy. It was all here.

Except home.

Except Mom.

My breath became sharp, ragged. Something pierced my eyes. My gaze dropped to the ground of the empty lot. At the bright yellow sawhorses marking off the hazardous area. The workmen tossing rubble into the back of trucks.

The ashes that remained.

What happened? Where did it go? How can it be gone?
I didn't understand. This didn't make any sense.

"Hey, miss, are you okay?" A voice interrupted my panicking thoughts. I jolted, blinked at the man approaching me. He wore a yellow hardhat, a thick vest with flashing tape. His hands were held up to me, thick work gloves covered in more dust. "You shouldn't be standing in the road like that, it's not safe."

I saw the concern on his face, didn't know how to respond. I looked back at where my building was supposed to be. "W-what happened…?"

My voice was hoarse. But the words easier. Somehow the protocol had broken. Most of it, at least. Broken by something. Broken by the brown-haired boy. The name he said.

"Don't you know?" the workman tilted his head at me, frowning. He scratched at the day-old stubble on his chin, glanced at the building. "It collapsed during the Incident. One of those big monster alien things fell right on top of it. Poor folks inside didn't stand a chance…"

**Collapse —**

"No, no i-it can't —" my voice broke and I tried to step forward, but the man held up his arm, prevented me from getting closer. I could only shake my head, my hands rising uselessly, as if I could will everything back to the way it used to be. "You don't understand, sh-she has to know. It can't be this one, it just can't…"

"Whoa, hey, take it easy, miss," The man stood in front of me now, trying to hold me back. "I'm sorry, you can't get too close. It's too dangerous. It was an old building. A lot of asbestos. Look, can I help you somehow? Were you looking for someone?"

"M-mom," I whispered, throat raw. "My mom. She...she lives here."

"Oh." The workman hands tightened around my shoulders, then went limp. A terrible look crossed his face. "Oh no. Oh, god, I'm so sorry — "

"She has to know," I pleaded with him, but my eyes were on the empty air above. I could still see it. I could still see the space where my bedroom was.

My knees buckled. The workman tried to catch me, but I hit the tarmac hard. It cut through my jeans. I didn't feel it. Just the cold in my hands. The vice around my throat.

*I had to tell her. I had to see Mom. I had to see her smile.*

"Hey, what's your name? Can I call someone for you? Do you have other family?" the workman tried to reason with me, his voice soft and urging. "Maybe a friend of your mom's?"

Everything was blurry. All I saw was the black road, the grey snow. My voice was barely audible. "She has to know I'm still alive. I-I came all this way —"

I choked.

"I'm sorry," was all the workman could say. His hand on my shoulder was the only thing I had left to this reality. He looked utterly helpless. In the back of my mind, I didn't blame him. This wasn't fair. This wasn't his job. "We all lost someone that day…"

I didn't hear him. I didn't hear the hum of car's engine approaching, the brakes screeching, rubber burning somewhere behind me. A car door slamming before it had come to a complete stop. Then —
"Mia!"

That name again.

I couldn't lift my gaze from the road. The empty hole. The ashes. Couldn't turn my head.

The workman stepped back, just as a new set of hands found me. He was fast, sudden, but I barely reacted. Didn't even recognize the face as he peered into my face. His words were so fast, so panicked, I could barely understand them. "Mia, oh my god, I knew you'd come here, I thought — I don't know, I just — why did you run? I would've told you, before you — god, you shouldn't see this —"

It took me so long to remember his name.

"Peter." I whispered, my face aching from the movement. The pain was returning as reality came crashing down. When I realized that this was the truth. That I could never come back home to Mom again.

"It's okay," He said, switching tracks. Maybe he heard it in my voice. He was on his knees, too, right in front of me. The boy with the brown eyes. My cousin. My best friend. A face I'd never forget. A face that would never change. "Whatever happens, you're safe now. Y-you don't have to run anymore."

Sirens rang in the distance, getting closer.

I searched his eyes, one last hope that this wasn't real. But there were none. No relief. No assurance. Just regret, even as he pretended otherwise. "You're home. It's going to be okay. I-I promise, Mia, i-it's not…"

But he saw it in my eyes. I already knew.

I was too late.
Chapter Thirty-Five

Chapter Summary

Coming Home Part II - Skylar Grey
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=88fh-gFstWg

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-Five

✮

ELEVEN HOURS LATER

The air was stale inside the FBI headquarters.

My body and mind were numb when I finally shuffled out of that boardroom — the two agents who'd been inside with me (and whose names were just garbled sounds in my memory) followed me. The woman had a guiding, gentle hand on my shoulder that I immediately wanted to shake off, but lacked the energy. They'd finally taken off the handcuffs an hour ago.

Fluorescent lights gleamed off the black windows. I could spot yellow and green squares of offices of other buildings across the street. Late-night workers. What time was it? My internal clock was lost somewhere in the heaviness of my mind.

The hub of cubicles in the center of the floor were still alive with activity. Rushing agents, irritable suspects, phone calls, keyboards, not to mention clanging pipes.

Despite all that, I almost liked it here. At least it was warm, as opposed to the interrogating room I'd sat in for four hours. In here, the heat had fogged up the windows. The carpeted floor and dark wood furniture added to the strange sense of coziness. The scent of bad coffee and Chinese take-out was the most New York thing I smelled in ages.

And everyone was nice to me, or at least polite. Especially when they found out who I was. What happened to me.

I hugged myself, pulling at the lapels of my jacket. The only sensation I was aware of was the cavernous feeling in my chest, and the hunger gnawing at my stomach.

Now I just wanted to get out of here.

"Mia?"

My name, softly spoken, rang clear as a bell. I turned, startled, by a movement out of the corner of my eye.
But it was nothing to be afraid of.

It was Peter.

He rose slowly from the bench — as if sensing he had scared me. His hair was all mussed, curls hanging over his forehead, like he’d been running his hand through it all day. His shoes were still soaked from running in the snowy streets.

My heart lurched. He’d grown taller, even though it was hard to tell, since I nearly towered over him. But the change was noticeable. His eyes were sharp and focused despite the lack of glasses. Did he wear contacts now? His hair was shorter, too. Gone was slightly over-long, curly mop of brown hair I was so used too. Short on all sides, a much more mature look. Uncle Ben would approve.

Next to him, a second slower, Aunt May rose up as well, adjusting her glasses, lips pressed tight together. Her knuckles were white around her purse. She hadn’t changed as much — her glasses were different, her hair longer, but overall her face hadn’t changed. One of the agents stopped in front of May to talk quietly; she seemed reluctant to engage him, but complied nonetheless, watching us out of the corner of her eye.

How long had they been waiting there for me? I couldn’t imagine what they were thinking at the sight of my bruised and bloody face. Or the rest of me.

For a long moment, Peter and I just stood there, five feet apart, staring at each other.

I had no control over the sudden lump in my throat, the burning in my eyes, the homesickness clutching my heart. Two years. Peter had changed so much in two years.

I wanted to say something. My mouth opened, but my tongue was flat and my chest tightened — my remained open helplessly, before I shut it again.

Under the warm precinct lights, Peter’s eyes shone. He nodded slightly. He didn’t need to hear me speak. He already knew what I was going to say.

The moment of stillness ended when Peter strode forward, his arms coming to wrap around my shoulders, so fast I faltered back. I didn’t anticipate his weight, his strength. I didn’t try to fend him off, my body was completely open, almost limp. It took a moment for my mind to register what happened, for my arms to rise and return the embrace. Hesitant at first, then my fingers tightened, gripped his jacketed — and I didn’t want to let go.

Peter pressed his face into my shoulder, so I didn’t realize he was crying until I felt he shoulders shaken, heard the tiny, choked gasp.

Hearing that, the tightness in my chest snapped. The tears started as a tiny shudder in my lungs, before slipping out my chest in a weak sob, and I clutched Peter tighter.

Then Peter spoke, his voice muffled against my shoulder. "I thought you were smaller."

Despite myself, I laughed, a painful, euphoric mix with the tears. "You used to be bigger."

He gave a raspy chuckle, then hiccupped. May, her quiet aside with the agent ending, just made a soft scoffing noise, a relieved smile on her wet cheeks, before coming in and enveloping both of us in one giant hug. Her grip was almost as strong as Peter’s; I figured if I was squeezed to death right here, right now, I’d die happy.

"Are you okay?" May asked, running her hand over my head, pushing hair out of my face. The
corners of her eyes were lined with worry. I must have looked like a nightmare. "Do you need a hospital?"

"N-no, I'm fine," I said, voice hoarse. I had been looked at by paramedics who arrived in an ambulance, shortly before the FBI did. My burns weren't bad enough to need hospital care, although the aid would've been better. I rejected the offer, not because I didn't think I needed it, but because I knew being interrogated by the FBI in a hospital would've been far worse than in their offices. Those pale walls, that antiseptic smell, the claustrophobic maze of halls, the echoing intercom calls… I only tolerated them because Mom was always there to comfort me.

A lump formed in my throat.

"Are you sure?" May frowned, her fingers sliding down to the bandage on my brow. Gingerly, she lifted, and gasped softly at the sight of black stitches. "Oh, god, how did this happen?"

I jerked away instinctively — both Peter and May released me from the hug, but Peter kept my sleeve pinched between two knuckles. His eyes widened when he saw the bad cut, right before I pressed the bandage back down. Peter's mouth opened slightly, but remained silent. I hadn't seen him in months, and remembering his expression of wanting-to-say-something-but-not sent a slight jolt of nostalgia through me.

To May, I spoke softly to hide how close I felt to crying again, "Please, I'm fine. R-really. I don't want a hospital, May. I-I just...I just want to go home."

May studied my face, brow knitting together as she bit her lip. She caressed my cheek, her warm hand smoothing over my bruised skin, away from the burns, and this time I successfully resisted the urge to flinch again.

Then she began to nod. "Okay, if that's what you want, Mia. We'll take you home."

"You're not in trouble?" Peter asked, glancing at the private offices. They overlooked the cubicles from the loft above. "Agent Burke said you set off a security alert at JFK, skipping through customs."

"Agent Burke?" I blinked, confused.

He pointed to the agent who'd been with me, the one that spoke to May, now on the other end of the room, — a middle-aged man with graying hair and a stern face, hands in his suit pockets and looking grumpy as he waited for the coffee machine to percolate. "Him. He's your case agent or whatever, right?"

"Oh, yeah," I shrugged, a little embarrassed. "I, um, couldn't remember his name…"

"So?" Peter turned back to me, eyebrows rising in worry. "You're safe now, right? They said you were chased all over Europe by the people who took you. What about the one who came off the plane with you?"

"Arrested. They're not after me anymore," I shook my head, and saying those words were the greatest relief I've had in... well, since I'd woken up in Sokovia.

Brandt had been caught soon after I'd escaped the airport. I was surprised she didn't immediately explode to get away, but according to Agent Burke, she had already lawyered up. I had a sneaking suspicion it was to hide her terrorist connections (if the FBI found out, it would only be that much worse for her and whoever she worked for). Her mysterious employer had found out what had happened and sent her a text message, calling the whole thing off.
"Their plan only worked because everyone thought I was dead," I explained with a shrug. "That's the l-logic, at least. N-no one was looking for me. They d-didn't have to hide that way. That's why they tried s-so hard to catch me again."

In retrospect, I was really glad I was picked up by the FBI. They had a whole task-force dedicated to missing children and kidnapping rings. If anyone had a chance at protecting me, it would be these guys.

But Peter still looked worried. "But Agent Burke said he thought you might've been a terrorist. Because of that big fight and all. Did you really attack a security guard?"

My mouth opened helplessly for a moment. I didn't know how to defend myself without digging myself deeper. I was so tired. I didn't want to deal with this anymore. I'd already repeated my story a million times, to both Agent Burke and half a dozen other people. Trying to prove I wasn't a terrorist was a far more awful experience than trying to prove I was really Amelia Fletcher. Or that Amelia Fletcher wasn't a terrorist.

Eventually, I managed to stammer out, "I-it was a just a, um, misunderstanding. I was just trying t-to get away…"

May smiled sympathetically, giving me another quick hug, squeezing my shoulders. "I know. No one blames a kid for fighting their kidnappers. You were so brave. So, so brave."

That was the story I told. Kidnapped by sadists, child traffickers, didn't matter, I was in captivity for two years in an Eastern European compound. Escaping left me at a disadvantage because I couldn't speak the language (as far as they knew), in unfamiliar land. Amnesia reduced most of my knowledge of what happened over that course of time, but guessing from the scars on my body, I was malnourished, mistreated, possibly even tortured. Trauma-induced amnesia prevented me from remembering the majority of the experience. But I still managed to get away, sneaking aboard from train to train until I made it to London, always staying a step ahead of my pursuing kidnappers. But they finally caught up with me on the plane, and I made one last desperate escape attempt upon landing. The ensuing fight caused a panic attack and I lost all reason as I fled from the airport, leaving several bruised (but alive) security guards in my wake, until I was found again at my old home.

Enough truth made it believable. The FBI bought it. But I couldn't take all the credit; most of it was Agent Coulson's idea, advice he'd given me before I left the Bus. Not that I ever thought about telling the whole truth; I felt a bit guilty about it, lying to Peter and Aunt May, but I didn't want them to know what really happened. What they knew already was bad enough.

To Peter, I said, "They've agreed not to press charges, because of my…" I paused, struggled to say the words. When they refused to come, I switched tracks. "B-because of what I've been through. Only caveat is that I'm on a no-fly list for three months."

"Fine by me," May didn't sound the least bit concerned by that news. She put one arm around me, the other around Peter, and started ushering us to the elevators. "I don't plan on letting you out of my sight for a long time."

I found myself walking in a daze. I had finally comprehended everything that happened recently — or only convinced myself I had.

When Aunt May drove, Peter usually called shotgun. Not tonight. Tonight, he sat in the back seat with me, shoulder to shoulder. Once, I might've complained by how close he sat, considering there was plenty of room back here for the both of us. But I didn't mind. The warm presence, the
companionship, was something I missed when I parted ways with Wanda and Pietro.

Everything seemed to have moved so fast in just a few hours. Just this morning I was in London. I averted what could’ve been another major terrorist attack. I ran away from the Crucible, and finally made it home, made it impossible for them to touch me again. And now, I was finally going home. Going to sleep in a real bed that didn't belong to someone else, not locked up, not on the run, not constantly looking over my shoulder.

Above all, I understood I was lucky. Beyond lucky. I didn't blame the disbelief of the FBI — they had every right to initially believe I wasn't alive. Because I shouldn't be.

Cold rain pattered the windows as May navigated the streets. Lights bounced and blurred off the drops, flashing in the dark night. The car was utterly silent aside from the engine and the faint radio playing in the background. It was a new song I'd never heard of before. Had Lady Gaga released a new album?

May was talking, mostly to herself. "If I'd known we'd be staying out so long I would've gotten some food. Hmm, maybe I still have some of that leftover meatloaf in the fridge. Oh! Lee's does late-night take-out, right…?"

Peter was unusually quiet. A part of me wondered if that was my fault. Was it because of how different I appeared? I could tell from the way they looked at me that I wasn't what they expected — dead or alive.

"How did you find me?" I asked, my voice soft enough to go unnoticed by May, who was still thinking out loud.

Peter turned his head towards me, a quizzical look on his face as he considered it, before shrugging one shoulder. "I dunno. I just figured you'd...want to go home. Instinct, you know? Those emails helped."

"You got my messages?" for the first time in an eternity, I grinned. I had been operating on the possibility that I was just sending those into the void, never knowing if they would ever reach their intended target, or anyone at all.

"Oh, yeah," Peter snorted, leaning back in his seat. "Cryptic mail in my inbox? No one else but you would do that."

"Sorry," I winced. I had been careful in how I coded my messages, but I never considered how difficult or confusing it might've been for him. "I didn't think you'd be listening. Since I was, you know, dead and all."

The words were funny on my mouth. The first five hours at the FBI were spent confirming my identity. Agent Burke had not been convinced by my initial story, considering I looked almost nothing like my previous self. How could the tiny, sickly child-like girl grow eleven inches and almost fifty pounds, seemingly cured, in just two years? Even I was astounded by the change, when they measured me for their records. Convincing him I was only fifteen was almost as hard as telling him that, yes, I really was Amelia Fletcher.

"Ha, right," Peter laughed wryly. "The first thing Agent Burke told us was that you were an imposter. How did you get him to believe you?"

"The magic of DNA," I shrugged my shoulders. Luckily that hadn't changed, despite exposure to Vita rays. "Metro General still had old samples on file for the FBI to check against mine. Honestly, I
was scared *you* guys wouldn't believe it was me."

"I've known that face since you were a baby," Aunt May said, and it almost sounded like a challenge. "If they thought a little growth spurt was going to throw me off, they had another thing coming."

"May almost bit off Agent Burke's head when he told her that," Peter informed me.

"Oh, like he didn't have it coming! The nerve!" May said, holding up a finger and gesturing righteously. "As if you kids don't grow like weeds. I knew a boy back in high school, freshman year, he was shorter than me and over the course of the summer, he grew a whole foot! Sure, no one recognized him when he got back, but that's not the point…"

The tension eased considerably on the drive home. I got more comfortable as Peter started to talk animatedly about what happened at school today (skipping class, getting a week’s worth of detention before Aunt May had explained the situation to Principal Morita over the phone). That then led to realization that Ned had no idea what was going on; a brief argument ensued between he and Aunt May, as she didn't want the news to break out tonight, and rather wait until morning.

"Mia's not going anywhere, Peter," she told him sternly, as Peter held his phone in his hand, fighting the urge to call Ned. "She'll be here tomorrow when you can call him, okay? I don't want the apartment swarmed in the middle of the night. We all need some sleep after today."

That finally got him to put away the phone, somewhat reluctantly. I didn't offer my opinion either way — I was too tired, and to be honest, I agreed with May. I didn't want to be mean to Peter or Ned, but I wasn't ready to deal with seeing everyone at once. Right now, this was enough.

I didn't fail to notice that neither of them had brought up Mom. Not that I blamed them; I wasn't exactly jumping at the chance to bring it up myself. What could I say? What could *they* say that would make this any better? And we had already reached a nice, happy mood in the car. I didn't want to ruin it now. The whole day left me numb enough that I didn't have to think too hard about it.

Agent Burke had been the one to confirm what I had already figured out on my own. That Mom was dead. Dead long before I ever managed to escape the Crucible.

There was something to be said about having that kind of information told to you by an impersonal party. To be fair, Burke seemed sympathetic, tried to soften the blow as best as he could.

But nothing could make it hurt less.

The only thing he could offer me was a certainty. That my life wasn't hanging in the balance anymore. I wasn't going to Social Services, or some distant relative on the other side of the country (didn't have any to begin with). My guardianship now fell to Aunt May. As far as bad news went, it could've been worse.

Of course, all our belongings were lost during the alien attack — the Incident, it was called here. Some local colloquialism. It was jarring to find myself disliking it; like I wasn't a New Yorker anymore, that 'local' didn't apply to me anymore. My home had been destroyed, and what was left of my old life with it.

Left with nothing.

*No, not nothing. You still have family.* I had to remind myself. It was hard to feel positive like this. A part of me just wanted to cry. But I didn't want to do that in the car, or when Peter or Aunt May could see it. They were already doing so much to help me. The last thing I wanted was to be
coddled.

Queens was far quieter than Hell's Kitchen, and I had to admit, the lack of constant police sirens in
the night would be a welcome relief. I had to drag myself out of the car; I wasn't even hungry
anymore, I just wanted to sleep, but I had a feeling I wasn't going to bed until May was sure that I'd
been fed.

Peter and I ended up camping on the couch in the living room. He had school tomorrow but didn't
seem concerned. We sat on either end, facing each other; I had about three different blankets draped
over my shoulders, my hair dripping wet after the best shower of my life. The flannel pajamas and
sweatshirt were May's — I had no clothes of my own that weren't stolen or dirty.

May was talking on the phone and frying eggs in the kitchen. Peter had once again gone silent,
studying the upholstery of the couch. He was thinking hard about something, I could tell by the way
his tongue stuck out of his mouth a little. But about what? I almost expected him to be talking
nonstop, wanting to catch me up.

I had just opened my mouth to prompt him when he blurted, "What happened?"

I stared at him, taken aback. "What do you mean?"

Peter hesitated, perhaps surprised by his own words, before continuing slowly, "I-I just mean… how
did you get back? Agent Burke told us what you told him but that can't be everything, can it? You
didn't tell him the whole story, did you?"

His tone wasn't accusing, but the hair on the back of my neck stood on end. How did he know?
What did he know? Did he think I was lying? Did he know something I didn't? My thoughts shot to
every awful thing that happened. Sokovia. London. The fight on the bridge, the boat exploding, the
train, fighting for the gun…

I shuddered. It took me a moment to calm myself, to push away the images. My story had been
vague. Of course, Peter would assume that. It was a completely reasonable question to ask.

"I-I... no." I admitted, my mouth suddenly dry. I clenched my hands into fists when my fingers
started to shake, and hid them under the blankets. I couldn't quite look Peter in the eye. "It wasn't
everything but… there's just — a lot happened. Everything in two years, I just… I-I don't really want
to talk about it."

"Oh, okay." Peter said, frowning as he sat back. He almost seemed disappointed, and as if realizing
this, sat forward again. With a new, earnest tone, he added, "N-not that you have to! I mean, I want
to know, but if you don't want to tell me, I understand. It's not a big deal. You just got back, after all.
We've got all the time in the world now, right? Everything's going to be fine."

I studied him for a moment, pressing my lips together. It seemed Peter was trying to convince himself
more than he was me. I was thinking of how to respond, maybe apologize (because I knew the
curiosity was killing him, it would be the same with me if our positions were switched); then May
swooped in with two plates of egg sandwiches, and the smell was so intoxicating I didn't wait before
biting into mine. At least it gave me more time to think, time to settle myself again.

Say something. He needs to know.

But what? It wasn't just what Coulson told me not to say. There was a lot I just didn't want to tell
Peter. Not ever. What would he think, if he found I actually killed a man? Maybe even more.

Silence fell again as the two of us chewed on our sandwiches, while Aunt May puttered off, doors
slamming, followed by muffled noises. Talking to herself again. Turned out the guest room wasn’t as clean as she thought.

It was all right with me, though. Honestly, I was just glad to be somewhere familiar again. I looked around the apartment, pleased and maybe a little taken aback by how it looked almost exactly the same as I last remembered it. The pile of boots and shoes by the doorway, the wonky ceramic cup Peter made in Third Grade sitting on the wall of bookshelves, the same red-checkered tablecloth on the booth in the kitchen. As always, there was the mess of loose DVDs and cases around the TV, and Uncle Ben’s old college typewriter collecting dust on a side table.

The changes, I noticed faster. The curtains were green instead of white now, and there were new pictures of Uncle Ben and Peter on the mantle, but other than that…

"I saw you. On the plane." the words were out of my mouth before I could stop myself. The thought had come from nowhere. Peter looked up from his sandwich, frowning at me in confusion. I ducked my head, embarrassed with myself. "Well, not really you. Brandt — the kidnapper — she drugged me. Ketamine, I think. It makes you, uh, hallucinate. And I talked to you."

"Really? What did I say?" Peter perked, a flicker of concern crossing his face.

"Uh," I pulled a face. The memory was groggy. I had only just recalled it. I wouldn’t have mentioned it if I had realized just how little I remembered. "I think y-you were telling me to get out. You told me to be like Ferris Bueller."

Peter choked on his sandwich, covered his mouth with his sleeve. Laughing seemed to have taken both of us by surprise. "Wait, wait, are you serious? You had a vision of me talking to you about Ferris Bueller? As in, the movie?"

"Yeah," I replied, starting to grin, too. "You saved my life. If it wasn’t for Ferris Bueller, I probably never would’ve gotten out of there on my own."

Peter just shook his head, still laughing. I couldn't believe how much I missed the sound. "Un-freaking-believable! Of all the things you could’ve seen, it had to be me. Did I have those dumb glasses I used to wear, too?"

The image came at me so fast my own laugh startled me, and I had to swallow my bite fast before I inhaled it on accident. "Oh, yeah! The ones that were too big for your face."

"And I’d totally say Ferris Bueller, too," Peter snickered, his shoulders shaking. So different to how he was just an hour ago, in the FBI building. "Ferris Bueller applies to everything. That movie was the best. Hey, wait, I still think we have the DVD, lemme go find it…"

We continued to eat in front of the TV. I could eat about ten of these egg sandwiches on my own, but I only finished three before my arms got too heavy to lift them to my mouth anymore. Peter himself had eaten two and a half; I had been tempted, for a moment, to challenge him to an eating contest, but decided it unwise considering his history of eating entire pizzas on his own.

Aunt May sighed as she flipped another egg onto some toast. Her back to the living room, she called, "Boy, you three are going to eat through this week's eggs in one night! I definitely should’ve ordered take-out…"

Then, with a plated sandwich in each hand, she turned and made another round towards the living room. It was dark aside from the glow of Matthew Broderick's face studying abstract art through sunglasses on the TV screen. "Peter, I think it's time you head off to bed now, it's past your —"
She came to a stop, standing over the couch. Both Mia and Peter had slumped over against each other, fast asleep, half-eaten sandwiches still in their hands. The exhaustion of the day had finally caught up with them.

It seemed too cruel to wake them up again and push them towards actual beds. May sighed, a faint smile pulling at her lips as she picked up their used plates, before tucking the blankets snug. The TV shut off with a tiny click from the remote, and she planted a kiss on each of their heads.

But when May pulled back, she continued to watch them for a bit longer, preserving this moment so it would forever last in her memory. The peaceful sleeping faces of two children who'd been through so much, broken in different ways, ways she might never fully understand. Everyone had lost something this year. They each bore gaping wounds they hid from one another, pretending it didn't hurt anymore.

Together again, everything felt whole.

Almost.
We're partners. We do it together. I'm not going without you.
Aesthetic/Moodboard and book cover by @puffandproud on tumblr

thank you, I love them so much! ^_^
There’s a small reference to White Collar in this chapter, a tv show which I love.
I woke to the sound of Aunt May's singing.

Warm November sunlight filtered into the living room from the curtained windows, nearly blinding me. It took me a second to recognize where I was — for some reason, I expected to wake up on a train, or in a bed I didn't recognize. Half-frozen, hungry, wide-awake in moments because the Komitet were still after me…

But none of that was true. Not anymore. I looked around the room, a delirious smile pulling across my face. I had been afraid, half-convinced this was some awful dream, that I'd wake up in a swamp of misery, and return to the awful life of a runaway.

But no. This was real. I was home.

I flinched, pulling up from where I had slumped over, slept on the couch. My entire body was sore from the day before, and my face twinged with the burns. The ice pack I'd been using the other day had long melted. There was a crick in my neck from the awkward position — I had used Peter's head for a pillow.

He was just as waking up as well, muttering under his breath. He opened his eyes once, groaned, then pulled the blanket over his head. "Not today, Sun, not today…"


The smell of Aunt May's certified-excellent pancakes frying filled the entire apartment, sweet and rich.

"It's a trap," came Peter's voice from under the blankets. He yawned, and I heard a small pop as he cracked his jaw. "Blergh. Don't trust the pancakes, they only wish to deceive you…"

That must have been when he heard the radio, and May singing along. Some bright pop song. Peter flew up, whipping the blanket off his head. His hair puffed out like a dandelion, one side flattened to his head. I had to hide my laughter behind my fist as he spun around on the spot, squinting at May, then back at me.

"She's singing?" Peter asked, rubbing a sleeve-covered hand against his face. It sounded like he was talking more to himself.

I yawned again. "Mmm. Why?"

"Oh, nothing," Peter just shrugged, scratching his head, pushing his hair into some form of order. "I just can't remember the last time she sang."

I frowned, but before I could ask what he meant by that, Aunt May called us over to the kitchen. She'd already set up the table; milk, orange juice, maple syrup, even strawberries and whipped
cream.

It made my mouth water. I loved strawberries and whipped cream on my pancakes. Mom always made them when —

I froze, the breath leaving my chest in a sharp, soft sigh. Mom.

In the bliss of waking up here, I'd forgotten that she was gone. Already, I missed those brief minutes where everything felt all right.

"Mia?" Aunt May tilted her head at me as she walked over to the table, both hands carrying plates full of fresh pancakes. Twin trails of steam wafted after her. "Is everything all right?"

"What?" I jolted on the spot, coming back to the present. Peter was already sitting at the booth — I hadn't even seen him pass me. They were both looking at me, and instead of ruining the breakfast by bringing up my thoughts, I quickly lied: "Oh, yeah. I'm fine. Just..., tired. What time is it?"

"Oh, only —" setting down the plates, Aunt May checked her watch. "— ten-thirty in the morning. You two were sound asleep for the entire night."

I nodded without answering, my last thoughts still swimming in my head. I'd already knew the time, but I didn't know how else to divert the conversation. Sitting down, I rubbed my hands to ease the sudden chill that had taken me.

"Do you want me to get some Neosporin for that?" Aunt May asked, and I looked down, realizing I was running my fingers over the cuts on my bruised knuckles.

The pain didn't even register to me, and I tucked my hands under the table in embarrassment. How could I not notice myself doing that? "N-no, I'm fine. They don't hurt much, really."

"Well, okay," May looked a little doubtful, but shrugged nonetheless. "Well, if you need anything, I still have some bandages. You remember where we keep them?"

"Behind the bathroom mirror," I replied, looking down at the pancakes. It took me a second to bring out my fingers over the cuts on my bruised knuckles.

"Are you trying to test her to see if she's really Mia?" Peter said through a mouthful of pancakes. He had already been shoveling them into his mouth when I sat down. At May's disapproving look, he swallowed, and said clearly, "I'm just saying. I'm pretty sure we picked up the right one from the FBI last night. Ow!"

I kicked him beneath the table. Not hard, or so I thought. Peter bent to rub his shin, looking genuinely pained, but tried to hide it behind some bravado. "What? It's a joke, Goose!"

I would've said sorry if it weren't for his shit-eating grin. Rolling my eyes, I grabbed the maple syrup and poured a generous amount over my plate. "You're usually funnier, Mav."

"Well, in case you haven't realized, my joking evolved since you were gone. I mean, if we're being honest, it's your sense of humor that's outdated here —"

"My sense of humor? Yours is the one that's gone down the drain, without anyone to critique it —"

Aunt May just sighed, shaking her head as she went back to the stove, grabbing her bowl to make more pancake mix. "Oh, Lord, what am I going to do with you two?"
But the both of us were grinning so hard we could barely keep up with the back and forth. It was all in good fun; this was just me and Peter catching up after two years apart.

And just like that I'd completely forgotten about Mom. Laughing, especially laughing with Peter, was something I had missed so much, it was such a relief to have it again. It almost hurt. I'd forgotten the effect he had on my optimism. It was just something you couldn't quantify.

Aunt May, perhaps sensing the same levity, started to sing along with the radio again, and the noise of the skillet sizzling with new batter filled the kitchen. Everything was warm, bright, lively — which Peter seemed especially appreciative, considering he would otherwise be at school right now. His phone (a new model I'd never seen before, yet already with a cracked screen — nice to see that Peter was still clumsy as ever) was buzzing on the table, incessant messages from Ned and others, but Peter just pushed it aside. It made me smile a bit wider.

"Is Ned freaking out?" I nodded towards the phone, grabbing the bottle of honey and pouring a very generous amount on my pancakes. I never realized how much I missed it until now. When was the last time I ever had any?

"Oh, he's totally freaking out," Peter replied, looking more amused than worried. He shrugged, "I'll tell him eventually. I think he already knows something happened from his mom. He doesn't know you're back yet — imagine the look on his face when he finds out. Oh, I know! You should be the one to tell him!"

"What, just knock on his door and say, 'Hey, Ned, surprise! I'm still alive!'" I shook my head, laughing to myself. "He'd have a heart attack."

"Eh, it'll be good for him." Peter said, but couldn't keep a straight face. Breaking down into snickers at whatever mental image he had conjured up, he raised a hand and added, "No, wait, we should record it! You can use my phone when it happens!"

"Peter, I'm not scaring Ned! He's probably going to start calling you any minute now."

Right on cue, Peter's phone started to buzz repeatedly, and a picture of Ned's face pulling a funny grimace appeared on the screen.

"Damn," Peter said, mildly impressed as he declined the call. I raised my eyebrows but didn't say anything. Ned must be losing his mind now. "Guess you're psychic, Mia. Did you get superpowers when you were gone, too?"

"What? Nooo," I said, laughing again, although this time out of nervousness, maybe even a little panic. "I-I don't have superpowers, ha-ha. N-nothing that I don't already have, anyways."

I winced at myself, wanting to smack my head. Idiot! Why would you say that?

But Peter just grinned, clearly taking it for a joke and not a serious admission. In a grandiose tone, he declared, "Amelia's computer wizardry has expanded! Can nothing stand in her way?"

"Hardy-har," I said sarcastically, but I was far more relieved than annoyed. How would they react if they knew I wasn't normal anymore? That I was a Super Soldier?

I didn't want to think about it.

Mutants had already proven that society didn't always accept those who were different. And I'd learned enough about the Avengers that not everyone liked their presence. Even in the past, the existence of Captain America, Hulk, and Iron Man were highly controversial. I knew Peter liked Iron
Man, but Tony Stark wasn't some drugged up science experiment. What would he think if he knew the truth about me? Would he hate me?

I watched as Peter scraped the last of his pancakes off his plate. He seemed so happy and carefree. No matter his opinion on superheroes, I didn't want to ruin this part of him.

I did, however, notice something was missing.

In the middle of eating my pancakes, it occurred to me that not everyone was here. Not everyone that should be here. Looking around, I almost expected an explanation, before I asked, "So where's Uncle Ben? Did he leave early for work?"

Peter went still. Aunt May stopped singing.

They looked at each other.

"Oh, god," Aunt May covered her mouth, hand trembling. She closed her eyes, shook her head. "We never said...I completely forgot..."

"What?" I frowned, glancing between the two of them. Peter said nothing. He had gone very pale, his eyes dropping down to his plate. His knuckles whitened around his fork. "What happened? Where's Uncle Ben?"

Face hidden behind her hair, Aunt May turned off the radio. An echoing silence fell over the kitchen. A long pause stretched, filled only with the silence of May's shuddering sigh.

Peter still hadn't said a word. A muscle twitched in his jaw.

Aunt May turned to me, hands knotted in her apron as she approached the table. I scooted over when she sat down next to me, placed a hand on my arm.

She struggled with the words for a moment, before she stammered, "Mia, something — something happened to Ben last spring..."

✮✮✮

Benjamin Parker

Devoted Husband and Uncle

1967 — 2012

I stared at the gray stone, trying to remind myself that this was real, and not another nightmare.

This time, I wished it wasn't true.

Next to his stone were four others. Peter's parents, Richard and Mary. Then Mom's. Then my own.

Seeing the last dates so close together rocked me back on my heels.

"I'm sorry," I said, feeling utterly stupid. Like I was a sympathetic friend, not someone who lost Ben, too. But I was numb. I couldn't think of something more poignant to say.
"It's all right," Peter shrugged. He stood next to me, shoulders hunched and hands stuffed deep into his coat pockets. His tone was light, but his expression was dull. I had a feeling he'd heard it a thousand times, and had wasted all his good responses on the people before me.

It was the first thing Peter had said anything to me in over an hour.

The wind was chilly, whistling through the yews of the cemetery. Dead grass crunched under my feet as I shifted my weight. The warmth that was promised to me this morning had been a lie. A false sense of comfort, so the shock would hurt that much worse. Despite the clear skies and the shining sun, it was bitter cold. I pretended to feel it as much as Peter did, hugging my arms. Mostly it was just to make myself feel better, standing in front of my own grave.

It was a little creepy, to say the least.

I focused on the other ones, trying to ground myself with the loss. I tried to think of something to say, but still, all I came up with was a blank.

After Aunt May told me what happened, Peter had taken me here. She hadn't come with us, and I didn't really blame her. Although she hadn't cried, I did, and I heard the noticeable shift in her trembling voice when I started. Maybe she didn't want to cry in front of me, too. Leaving the apartment just felt like a good idea. So everyone could be alone for a little bit, have time for themselves.

At some point, I just settled with the silence. Maybe some things were better said without words.

I stared at Mom's grave. I just read her name over and over again. As if it would prove itself to be an illusion and disappear.

Hedy Parker. It was strange to see next to the grave of Amelia Fletcher. Loving Mother; Beloved Daughter. Mom was always unmarried, but no one referred to her as Ms. Fletcher until I was in Kindergarten, and the teacher just assumed we had the same name. Mom had gone along with it, probably to make me feel better. I already stood out enough as it was, tiny and sick all the time. Kids were curious and teachers gossiped; what rumors would be spread if they had only a piece of the truth? It wasn't their business anyways.

The difference of surnames was her idea — although she never told me explicitly, Fletcher was the name my father gave her. Giving it to me was her way of revenge for his leaving — that if he ever came around again, he'd know I was his.

Mom was always a bit of a rebel, in a subtle way. I guess I inherited it from her.

I cried when I first learned Mom died. First in Hell's Kitchen, then with the FBI. It was worst the first time, the second time had only been a few tears. Now, looking at her gravestone, I didn't cry at all. Was there something wrong with me?

I didn't want to bring it up with Peter. I already felt like an outsider, being the last to know. Peter had months to deal with this, and now here he was, experiencing it again. A second time. A third time. I didn't feel sad. I felt guilty. While I loved Uncle Ben, I had never had been as close to him as Peter was. It wasn't that Uncle Ben played favorites, but they just connected better. And I was already so close with Mom. Maybe I had something against father figures.

This thought didn't help the idea that something was wrong with me. Keeping secrets, telling lies, and now this? It was like I'd forgotten how to be normal.

The sudden void of Uncle Ben's loss was just another punch in the gut. Suddenly, I wondered what
was going to happen to all of his model airplanes. Had he finished all the ones he said he would? What would happen to all those unfinished projects? It felt wrong to just leave them there collecting dust, but was it's bad luck to finish them, either?

It was inane. I didn't know why this bothered me, but it did. I hated leaving things unfinished. But I didn't want to make things worse, either.

And how were Peter and Aunt May managing? Uncle Ben had been the main breadwinner, although May had her own job. Was it harder now, for them? Was I making things worse, giving them another mouth to feed? I didn't even have my own clothes. I was still borrowing May's, even her coat. I couldn't do that forever. Buying a new wardrobe would be expensive; I couldn't do that to them...

What could I do? What could I say?

"Remember what you said to me, that day?" I heard my voice like it wasn't me, like I was someone else far away.

Peter turned towards me, confused. So, I licked my chapped lips and continue: "You asked me if I dreamed of a better life."

"Oh, yeah," Peter hung his head, kicked at the dead grass. His tone was sullen. Maybe I shouldn't have brought this up. "You said no, but I pushed you, and you got angry. We...we fought about it."

"I hated my life. I didn't think it could be any worse than that," I said, something cold and hard forming in my chest as I read the names over and over. Benjamin, Richard, Mary, Hedy.

My fingers tightened around my arms. "I was wrong."

Then I turned and walked away.

Peter caught up with me, kicking up leaves as he went, suddenly eager and worried. "I'm sorry I said all of that! I never wanted to hurt you. I didn't mean to call you a-a burden. And then that fight with your mom... If I could, I'd take it all back —"

But I just laughed a little "Peter, I'm not angry about that anymore. I'm the one who should apologize. I never should've said those things to you. God, the whole thing... it just seems so silly now. Like it doesn't even matter anymore."

Peter was silent for a moment, keeping pace with me as we headed down the stone path. "It mattered at the time."

I nodded, a bit reluctant. "I guess. I don't know, I just wanted you to know that I-I never wanted those words to be the last thing I ever said to you."

"I understand," he replied, quiet. Didn't say any more than that. Maybe he already knew I regretted those words.

Or maybe he regretted his.

"But you were right." I added, and his head perked up in surprise. "I hated it when people told me what I should do."

"Are you sure that's changed?" Peter asked, and when I laughed, so did he.
"Maybe not," I admitted, then offered him a small smile. "But I'll try better to listen this time. And maybe you can stop being so passive-aggressive next time."

"Duly noted," Peter grinned, then nudged me with his elbow. "Hey, wanna get some ice cream at that place in Hell's Kitchen?"

"Peter, we're in Queens. I don't think Aunt May wants us going so far without adult supervision."

"Okay, fine," Peter rolled his eyes, and even I was annoyed at my own rule-following. "There's this new shawarma place a block from the apartment."

"What the heck is shawarma?"

"Oh, it's awesome. Mr. Stark recommended it to me —"

"Mr. Stark?" I came to an abrupt stop. We stood at the gates of the cemetery, cars rushing by just past the sidewalk. I stared at Peter. "As in, Tony Stark?"

"Uh, yeah, I didn't tell you?" Peter scratched the back of his head, smiling awkwardly. We both knew he hadn't told me...whatever it was. "I got an internship at Stark Industries. I, uh, work at the Tower."

An internship? With Tony Stark? I couldn't believe it. Something like that would've made me excited before. Now, I was worried, which was annoying because it made me feel like Aunt May. I never worried. This was Peter. If anyone could handle a Stark internship, it was him.

Of course, that was kind of hard to get across.

"That thing?" I pointed at the Manhattan skyline. Stark Tower stood out, with its scaffolding and white tarp covering the upper half of the building. "It looks like its gonna fall over at any moment."

"Oh, it's totally safe, I swear!" Peter urged, holding out his hands. "Mr. Stark's rebuilding it, making it better than last time. 'Changing the outlook of this eyesore' he said, whatever that means. All I know is that the sign won't be saying 'Stark' anymore."

"What will it say, then?"

"I dunno," Peter shrugged, before leading the way back to the apartment. Or the shawarma place (I still had my reservations). "But the some of the Avengers hang out there now. Hawkeye. Bruce Banner. Captain America, even. It's really cool. Although security is hell."

"You've seen them?" I gaped, impressed.

"Well, no," Peter made a face. "I mean, Mr. Stark always says I might, but I think he's just trying to keep my hopes up. They're busy, you know? Saving the world and stuff. I think they're still trying to convince the Mayor it's safe with them being there, all in one place. I mean, ever since the Incident —"

Peter cut himself off, and at first, I didn't know why. Then I remembered: Mom. I ducked my head, looking away for a moment, studying a passing taxi. I didn't want Peter to tiptoe around me whenever the topic of the Incident came up. That didn't bother me. I wasn't even there. Mom's death felt almost separate compared to that. Maybe I hadn't fully comprehended it yet.

"It's fine," I finally said, when he was unable to continue. "I'm not fragile, Peter. I know what happened."
Peter nodded, then cleared his throat. "Okay, um, well...ever since the Incident, people've been afraid that it'll happen again. I mean, aliens, right? What if there are more? Where did they come from? It's probably better the Avengers stay here, in case something else happens. Rumor has it they pissed off a Norse god or two."

"Norse gods," I repeated in a murmur, looking up at the sky. Its massive expanse, clean and even when, at one point, there had been a massive black portal hanging over the city. "That's something I'm still getting used to."

✮✮✮

Aunt May was in better spirits when we got back.

We had brought the shawarma with us. It was sort of like a burrito, only far better in my opinion. I didn't think it would be as good as Peter promised.

"I have something to show you," Aunt May told me with a smile, before heading down the hall.

I paused, a little stunned. She was...happy again? I was still reeling from this morning. But May moved briskly, and I shared a look with Peter. He just shrugged, so I followed her.

She led me straight to the guest bedroom. Opening the door with a sweep of her arms, Aunt May said, "Voilà!"

The guest bedroom was spotless. The bed was made, the curtains were drawn, the mirror sparkling. If I was stunned before, I was really stunned now. The guest bedroom was usually musty, filled with boxes and crap no one used. Now the floor was clean, the bookshelf empty, the desk clean. There was only one box left, resting on top of the bed.

I gaped at Aunt May, who just clapped her hands together and, as if reading my mind, said, "Yes, it's for you! I finished cleaning it this morning. One night on the couch is enough, I think."

"Wow, Aunt May, thank you so much," I said, stepping into the room and taking it all in. The bed was queen-sized, meant for a couple, and far bigger than my last bed. The room itself was larger than my old one, and as I came to sit down on the mattress, I glanced over at the box. "What's this?"

"Oh, well, that's what we salvaged from your mother's place, after the Incident," Aunt May's smile dimmed a little, but she gestured for me to open it. "It wasn't much, and for a while I just thought about throwing it away... but I figured it was best you have it."

Throwing her one last curious look, I pulled the box onto my lap and opened it.

"Oh, my god," I said, when I pulled out the first thing on top. The blue plush stuffed animal. "Stitch! I never thought I'd see him again!"

He was a little more beat up since I last had him. Soot and ash stained parts of the fabric, and one ear had a tear in it, but that had been amended, and he smelled of fabric softener (and maybe a little smoke). A look of delight filled Aunt May's face as I hugged him close, bringing back nights of childhood when I needed him most.

"I thought you might like that," she said, pushing her glasses further up her nose and leaning against
the doorframe. "You can keep looking at that, but I just wanted you to know, I don't want you to worry about anything, okay? I saw it on your face this morning. I want you here, Mia. I'm not sending you off just because it might be a little harder for me. I know the best thing for you — and for Peter — is for us to stick together, okay?"

Still hugging Stitch, I nodded, although my lips were pressed together. I felt like a little kid again, clutching my stuffed toy, scared and trusting the adults to manage things. Doubts still clouded my mind. It didn't occur to me until now that Aunt May might be putting on a brave face. That she had cleaned this room, after just reliving the death of Uncle Ben. That she was keeping that from me, so I didn't get overwhelmed. I couldn't imagine what she must be going through right now. The stress, the pain. I knew I had it bad for a while, but I didn't have the responsibility of a parent.

"Hey, I'm serious," Aunt May came to sit down next to me, wrapping an arm around my shoulder and giving me a tight squeeze. She touched her forehead to mine. "No worrying, okay? I got this. I'm cool like that."

That made me chuckle a little, and she kissed the top of my head. "See, there's the face I want. I know you've been through a lot, Mia. We all have. But don't be afraid to tell me if something's wrong, okay? I want to know. It's my job to know."

I nodded again, starting to feel like a bobble-head. "I just— I just feel bad. You didn't have to do this before..."

"What do you mean?" She gave me a funny look, eyes flicking up and down. She was exaggerating her expression a little, to give a sense of levity to the conversation. "I've always done this, you just were never there. What do you think your mother and I talked about when we were together? We weren't sharing knitting patterns and solitaire strategies, if that's what you're thinking. She didn't have it easy, being on her own, but she managed. And boy, she didn't like to share, either."

"She didn't?" I asked, surprised. I'd never heard this side of my mom before.

"Oh, no," Aunt May waved her hand, shaking her head. "Your mom, she always had this sense of pride in herself, you know? She didn't like asking for help. She certainly didn't want anyone thinking she couldn't take care of you, and you were a handful even on your good days." She gave me another squeeze. "I'm just teasing you. But no, Hedy didn't like to talk about herself. It always took a wineglass or two to get her to even mention her problems.

"Unfortunately, that trick only works on adults," she winked at me. "So please, Mia, just be honest with me. Whatever it is, I swear, I won't be angry with you."

That seemed like a request to say something now, so I took a moment to think it over. "I guess...I guess I've been wondering about my clothes. Not that I don't like yours! But I'm taller than you now and they don't, ah —"

"Fit?" Aunt May laughed, tugging at my shirt, which showed off more of my stomach than it should. "Yeah, I noticed. It's okay, we'll take care of that with some shopping. I don't think I've ever taken you shopping before."

I threw her a look of alarm. "But the money —"

"Hey, what did I say about worrying?" Aunt May gave me a stern look over her glasses, tapping me with her finger. "None of that, remember? There wasn't much of your place left, but your mom left you everything in her will. I never had the heart to use any of it, but now that you're back, I think I can find a reason to spend some. But most of it still goes towards college, so don't get any funny
"Funny ideas? Never heard of 'em."

"Attagirl," Aunt May booped me on the nose, and I scrunched up my face. "You just get settled in here, okay? I'm gonna be in the kitchen, making sure Peter didn't burn down the place while I was gone."

"Wouldn't we smell the smoke by now?"

"You'd think so, right?" Aunt May cock an eyebrow as she stood up. "Let's not forget the Baked Potato in the Microwave Fiasco of 2007."

"Oh, right," I said, nodding sagely. The Fiasco was when Peter, who didn't know you shouldn't put metal in the microwave, tried to make a baked potato without a grill. "Didn't he do it again in 2009?"

"He did! Oh, that boy," Aunt May snapped her fingers. Stepping out of the room, she closed the door behind her. "Peter! You better not be cooking anything in my kitchen!"

There was a long pause before Peter's voice echoed back. "...No?"

"That sounded like a 'yes' to me!" Aunt May called back, and her footsteps echoed down the hall. I heard their muffled chatter, but it wasn't angry, so I ignored it and went back to the box in my lap.

Setting aside Stitch, I dug deeper into what remained of my old life.

My fingers wrapped around something small, glass and plastic. I pulled out my own pink glasses, one lens cracked. I unfolded them and put them on, trying to see through the lens — only for a headache to shoot up behind my eyes. The world was a blur behind them. Taking them off, I shook my head. I had noticed shortly after waking up in Sokovia that I didn't need my glasses to see clearly. It felt weird now, that I didn't need them anymore.

They were useless now. But I knew I could never throw them away.

Beneath the glasses were textbooks. Not mine, but Mom's. Her old medical books that I used to read when I was bored. The edges were worn, parts burned, but it was still in good condition. Trapped between the pages were sheets of notepaper — my homework from last year. Wow. Was my handwriting always that messy? And to think I was usually so organized.

And at the very bottom of the box was folded purple cloth. I almost didn't recognize it at first — until I touched it, felt that familiar soft cotton. Lifting it, the cloth unfolded to reveal the NYU logo. Mom's old sweater. The one I used to wear, the one that was always too big for me.

It looked...so small now.

I brought the sweater to my face; I could just barely catch the faintest whiff of Mom's perfume on it. The lavender fabric softener she used.

Tears pricked my eyes. Why did this stupid sweater hurt more than seeing her grave did? It just didn't make any sense.

I didn't even hear the phone ring, so I was surprised when Aunt May opened the door again, offering me the phone. She mouthed the words For you.

Curious, confused, I picked up the phone. "Hello?"
"Hello, is this Amelia Fletcher?" a female voice asked.

"Speaking."

"Oh, hi, Amelia!" the woman went all perky in an instant. "I'm Kim Kramer, a reporter for ABC. Welcome home! We're so glad to hear you're safe again."

"Uh," I frowned, not really sure if I believed her or not. ABC, the news company? Calling to make sure I was all right? "Thanks."

"We heard you had quite an adventure! Would you mind answering a few questions for me?"

"Is this an interview?"

"Well, yes. I'm writing an article about your interesting tale. After the whole JFK affair yesterday, and the FBI saying they recovered a kidnapping victim...well, we had to get the details. Is it true you've been in captivity for two years? And came all the way over from Russia, all by yourself?"

"What? No, I was never in Russia," I closed my eyes and pressed a hand to my forehead. Before I could decline this interview, it was already getting out of control. "I was...somewhere in Eastern Europe. I don't know. I couldn't read the language."

"Uh-huh." I could hear a keyboard clacking in the background as Kim took notes. "And who was the woman you were with on the plane? She was your kidnapper, right? Can you describe her for us?"

"I-I, um, she was..." I stammered, trying to find the right words as Brandt's face appeared in my head — her glowing eyes, her burning hands, attacking me, throttling me, the blinding white snow —


I suddenly felt sick, dizzy. I was gripping the phone too hard. My other hand knotted in the comforter beneath me. My voice was hoarse when I said, "Yes, she was th-the one who kidnapped me."

"You wouldn't perchance have a name, would you? The FBI aren't releasing her information to us yet. They say she may have ties to terrorist organizations —"

"I don't know," I cut her off. I wanted this conversation to end. Now. "I-I don't know who she was."

"Oh. Okay, then," Kim replied, somewhat hesitant, maybe a little disappointed. "How about you tell us more about what happened Europe? Must have been quite a trip, huh? Seen any cool sites?"

"It wasn't a vacation!" I snapped, trying to remember how to breathe. My face was burning. I could still hear Brandt's voice, whispering those words in my ear as she pinned me down to the floor. My skin broke out into a cold sweat, and I struggled to keep from stuttering. "L-look, I don't want to talk a-about this anymore, okay? I d-don't want you writing about me."

"What? But people are curious!" Kim protested, in that sort of urging way that was supposed to tempt me. "People want to know what happened to you!"

"No, they don't," I said, voice hard. No one wanted to know what I went through. They didn't want to know about the Crucible or the torture. They didn't want those sorts of details. They just wanted the happy ending. "Trust me."
"Are you sure? Because we're also wondering if you'd be interested in going on live TV with our anchors," Kim continued, with about the worst idea I've ever heard. "For the evening news hour, when everyone's watching. Of course, since you're a minor, we'll need your mom or dad to sign off on this —"

"No."

"What?" Kim asked, startled.

"No." I repeated, stronger this time. "I'm not doing any interviews. I'm not going on TV."

"Amelia, please, think about this," Kim laughed, but it was nervous. She knew she was losing me. She didn't know her efforts were fruitless. "This is real news. You were kidnapped and no one even knew. People are worried. They want to know if something like this might happen to their own kids —"

"Then go to the FBI!" I said, already well-aware that the FBI wasn't going to hand out the personal information of a minor. "They can tell you all you want to know about staying safe. But you're not getting anything else from me."

"I know, but people will react better to a personal story —"

"Exactly, it's personal." I said. "I don't need the whole world knowing my business. I just want to be left alone."

"Amelia, don't you think you're being a little unreasonable —"

I hung up.

It took all my effort not to throw the phone against the wall. To hold onto it, to remind myself I was here, in Queens, and not back on the train in Sokovia, where we were attacked by the Vulkan. That Brandt was arrested, that she would never hurt me again —

"What was that about?"

I blinked, looked up to see Peter and May peering at me in the doorway, identical expressions of curiosity on their faces.

I took a deep breath, before holding out the phone for one of them to take. "It was ABC, asking me about what happened. They wanted me to do a TV interview." I paused, wondering how to phrase it nicely, considering my current mood. "I said no."

May took the phone. From the look in her eye, I could tell she knew it didn't go well. "Well, I'm sure they're just doing their jobs, but you'd think they'd wait a few days so you actually got settled first…"

"News doesn't wait for anyone," Peter said from the doorway, shrugging. "You'll probably be getting more calls from other stations."

"If we do, I don't want to answer them," I replied shortly, repressing a shudder. I didn't want to go through a hundred other Kim Kramers looking for a good story.

"What do you want me to tell them?" Aunt May asked.

I had to think it over. At this point, I didn't want any attention. I didn't want to see my face on the news. I didn't want people to know my entire life story, turn it into some inspirational Hallmark
movie about the struggle of love and survival. The sooner this news wave passed, the sooner I faded back into anonymity, the better.

"Just tell them," I said. "No comment."

Poster done by @dreamerwithapen1 on tumblr. Thank you so much, I love it!
Chapter Thirty-Seven

I spent the week sleeping.

Peter turned out to be right about the news stations. They came after us like hounds — first came the phone calls. In the first day alone of my being back, we had over a dozen phone calls before dinner, and even more afterwards. After we hit 37, May unplugged all the phones.

Then they came in person, knocking on our doors. Reporters and photographers, with microphones, cameras, the whole shebang. It was even worse, because now the neighbors knew something was up, and most of them didn't even know who I was, much less that I was back from the dead. Of course, that was going to change if these idiots kept making a racket.

May turned away each and every one of them. I wasn't a witness for most of them — she thought it was better they never even saw me, so they could report their own accounts.

That was fine with me. Of course, I spent so much time sleeping that I had no idea Ned came by to visit until I woke up several hours after he'd left. I was disappointed when Peter told me, but I made up for the missed opportunity later when Ned called back.

"Mia!" his shout practically blew out my eardrums when I first brought Peter's cellphone to my ear. We were sitting in his room, and I couldn't help but notice how he started a collection of newspaper clippings above his desk. "Is that you?"

I winced a little, laughing. "Yeah, Ned, it's me."

"Back from the dead!" Ned was still shouting, and I realized I was lucky to have avoided this experience face-to-face. I was still too tired to deal with this. "I'm so glad you're okay. You are okay, right? I heard you were all over Europe. And what was up with that weird email thing?"

Peter gave me an apologetic grin from his bed as I rubbed my temple. "It's, um, kind of a long story. But you and Peter figured it out, right?"

"Oh, yeah! We totally knew you were still alive! Hey, so when do you think you're coming back to school? Peter made me promise not to tell anyone until you're ready."

"I…" My voice drifted a bit. To be honest, I hadn't thought of it until now. It was only my second day home. "I'm not sure. But soon, I hope."

"Awesome!" I could practically hear Ned fist pumping. "I can't wait. Can you imagine the looks on everyone's faces when you come walking through those doors? I mean, they know you're alive and all, but still, they're totally gonna freak, I know it. Well, except for the ones who have no idea who you are…uh, but hey, at least you might finally be able to come to Midtown…"

Ned went on like that, and I tried my best to keep up my end of the conversation, but in the end, I just ended up listening and nodded my head for another hour. I'd forgotten how energetic and
talkative Ned was. I missed it, like I missed everything else, but like everything in life, only in small
doses first. I was actually exhausted when I finally handed the phone to Peter, who picked up Ned's
conversation without missing a beat. I'm not even sure if Ned noticed.

The second night at home, I woke up disoriented, alone and confused in an unfamiliar room — I
nearly had a panic attack before I remembered where I was, that I was safe.

And that was the worst part. Being alone, I mean. May went back to work, and Peter still had school,
which left me in the apartment by myself for over eight hours. Some kids might find this liberating,
fun — you could do whatever you wanted, right? But I didn't have the energy, the joy to just relax
and take in the silence.

I'd already had enough silence. I'd spent enough time on my own to know that I hated it. I hated
every knock on the door, wondering who it was but knowing I couldn't answer it, only praying
they'd go away soon. I hated the sudden bursts of police sirens that echoed down the streets; the
bangs I thought were gunshots, but were just the old radiator pipes clanging up and down the
building. Darkness shrouded my bedroom, since I kept the window closed and covered at all times. I
always kept it in my line of sight, trying to tell myself I was crazy for feeling paranoid, like there
wasn't a sniper currently lining up his sights to the back of my head.

I missed Aunt May and Peter so much that I couldn't stand being out of their presence. For almost the
entirety of my trip back home, I had always had companionship in the form of Wanda and Pietro. I'd
gotten used to their presence that it hurt when I woke up alone on the Bus, and I'd forgotten the
intense fear and helplessness I felt first waking up alone in those snowy mountains, wandering in a
daze.

It was just like that, all over again. Alone, confused, lost.

And on top of it all, my dreams soon revealed to be one less respite to hide in. I had a small
nightmare when I had slept on the couch; that had been a preamble to what would eventually
become a regular occurrence whenever I closed my eyes. I didn't even have to be asleep anymore.
The Crucible still found me, still filled my head with images and memories I didn't want anymore.

It wasn't fair. This should be over now, shouldn't it? I did it. I had finally made it home, but it was
like I couldn't get away. I didn't want to keep reliving this anymore.

I didn't tell Aunt May or Peter. Five days in, and I felt about as well-rested as never, but I broke my
promise and didn't tell her about the dreams. About how I slept through the days, but found the
nights restless, haunting. But Aunt May must have figured out something was going on; it was just
the way she looked at me sometimes, like she was worried, like she knew I was holding back when I
laughed and smiled with Peter as he recounted school events.

I was starting to think I might have a problem when Aunt May surprised me in the middle of a
reverie.

"Mia?" Her hand touched my shoulder and I nearly jumped out of my skin.

I had been in the middle of vacuuming. It might seem lame, but I'd taken up doing some chores just
to keep myself occupied during the day, so my mind didn't wander to places I didn't want it to go.

It didn't always work. The sound of the vacuum's motor had filled my ears to a deep rumbling, and
for a moment I found myself back in Novi Grad, facing off the massive force of the tanks as they
leveled their cannons at the city and the gathering resistance fighters.
May's touch pulled me back, and I found myself a little breathless, gripping the vacuum handle too tight. I could feel the plastic hand starting to give, and I had to consciously unclench my hand before I could break it in front of Aunt May.

Her voice echoed, as though she were shouting down a long tunnel, even as she stood, right in front of me. "Are you okay?"

"What?" I asked, stumbling on my feet a little. I glanced around, again feeling out of place, wondering where this apartment came from when I was just in Sokovia moments before.

"You've been standing still right there for ten minutes," Aunt May said, frowning in concern. She reached over and turned off the vacuum for me. "Just staring at the wall. Is everything okay?"

I looked down at myself, surprised. Had I really not been doing anything for so long? How did I keep losing track of time? "I-I'm okay. Just thinking."

"About what?" Aunt May asked, tilting her head.

I just shrugged, making a noncommittal noise. It was an innocent question, and I hoped she'd buy a vague answer. I couldn't come up with a lie on the spot; I didn't know what to say. How could I talk about it to someone who was never there? She'd never understand, not really, not in the way Wanda and Pietro would.

I missed them. I missed them so much. I should've tried harder to bring them with me to America.

"About school?" Aunt May guessed, her voice once more startling me. I'd zoned out again, and I shook myself over, frustrated. I had to stop doing that, especially when I was in front of people.

"Um, yeah, a little," I lied, another shrug. It was about a good idea as any.

Her eyes pinched around the corners, as if she could tell I was just making this up on the spot. That I was covering again. Sometimes I liked to think I was a good liar, but then I forgot that there were people like Aunt May who knew me too well. Yet, for some reason, she didn't call me out on it.

Instead, she said, "Hmm, me too. I was thinking you could start again in January, with the new semester. How does that sound?"

"Whoa, what, January?" My heart skipped a beat. Suddenly I was highly aware of my environment. I shook my head, unable to believe the thought. January? I couldn't do January. "No way. I can't wait that long."

"Well, it's pretty late in the school year. You're way too far behind to catch up now," Aunt May pointed out, screwing up her lips to one side as she planted her hands on her hips. "Mia, I really don't think it's a good idea to start before next year. You just got back. Everyone will understand that you need to rest a bit more, that you need time to adjust —"

"No, you don't understand!" I held up my hands, almost a little frantic. Adjust? This wasn't about adjusting. I couldn't keep doing this for another two months. "I can't sit here at home just twiddling my thumbs all day, or I'm going to lose my freaking mind! I need to do something."

"Okay, okay!" Aunt May took a half-step back, startled by my reaction. Clearly, she didn't think I'd take it so seriously. "Hey, it's fine, Mia. I didn't realize it bothered you so much. If you really want to go back to school, then I... I'm sure we can work something out with one of the schools."

"R-really?" I asked, slumping in relief. I had to take a second to catch my breath. Even I was a little
caught off guard by my reaction. I underestimated how badly I wanted to get out of here.

"Of course," Aunt May smiled, and she put a placating hand on my arm again — only to pull away again when I flinched. Her smile wavered, and she added, "Just sit tight, okay? I'll call the school board, see what we can do."

I nodded stiffly, both hands back around the handle of the vacuum again. I didn't realize I'd gone completely tense until Aunt May left for the kitchen, when I relaxed again. My blood was pounding. It felt like I'd just ran a mile through the streets of Novi Grad.

And all just so I could go back to school.

Jeez.

✮✮✮

"Mia, I'm so glad to see you're doing...well."

Principal Morita seemed unsure of his own statement as his eyes traveled up to my head, down to my feet, then back up again. He hesitated before taking my hand, looking a little pale. I stood three inches over his head. I was likewise a little taken aback by how small he seemed.

Aunt May had my back, and she nudged me forward when Principal Morita retreated to his desk. She was looking extra perky today — to give me that extra optimism, and maybe cow any adversity through the sheer power of her smile. It used to work on Uncle Ben all the time.

We took the two seats in front of Morita's desk. His room was small, with windows along one wall showing the corridor outside, but it was quiet in here. I noted the framed picture up on one shelf, along with a frame of WWII medals. It occurred to me I'd never been in here. I had no idea Morita had family that served in the war. It looked like it could've been his dad. Actually, he looked a little familiar... was that one of the Howling Commandos?

It was after class on a Tuesday. Peter was somewhere in the school, but the rest was nearly empty — no one had seen me when I came in, which was just fine by me. At least Principal Morita knew what I looked like now, for future reference.

"So, Mia, your aunt tells me you want to attend Midtown," Morita started, lacing his fingers across his desk, brown eyes furrowing a little. He spoke with a measured tone, but I could still hear his uncertainty. "I have to admit, I'm a little surprised. I don't usually get kids who want to come back to school, especially so soon after..." he paused, then cleared his throat. "Ahem. Well, I just want to let you know that... after everything that's happened, we're here for you. We'll do anything we can to help you out."

"Thanks," I said, feeling dumb. I wasn't going to ask him what he meant by that. "I just... I don't want to wait until next semester. I know it's November, a-and I've missed a lot of classes, but it wouldn't be much different if I were a new student, right? I can just jump right in."

"Of course," Morita gave me a small smile, then pulled out some paperwork from a drawer. "I had the chance to look over your SHSAT scores personally and I have to say, I'm impressed. Your scores were, well, nearly off the charts. Your grade increased a total of 143% from the last attempt you took two years ago."
"Oh, you know, I had a lot of spare time," I shrugged, a little awkwardly. I had taken the SHSAT two days ago — a lenient gesture by the DOA because of my situation, and extra test time given thanks to my reading and writing difficulty — with a speedy judging process. I had no idea what my scores were until now, just that I had gotten an offer from Midtown, like I wanted.

I knew I should be extremely grateful for the favor they did, but right now I was just embarrassed. I had three days to study since May called and had the test arranged; I couldn't sleep well, so that boosted the amount of time I had to hit the books. But my dedication wasn't what made me embarrassed; it was how easy the SHSAT had been this time. Even now, I was struggling to understand how I had such a hard time with it the first time. Reading aside, the answers had come to me easily, the logic obvious, the processes simple.

In the end, I understood what it truly meant. The Crucible had given me more than a physical upgrade, but a mental one as well. Only now was I started to fully realize it.

It's been two years, and now I was finally getting what I wanted. High school in Midtown.

And I couldn't have done it without the Crucible.

"Well, it certainly paid off," Principal Morita said, chuckling genially. He set the papers down, and I spotted the percentile rating of my scores. God, he wasn't kidding about being off the charts. "Since you, er, left school at the start of Eighth grade, I think it would be best if you began with the Freshman curriculum. By the end of Spring semester, you'll be caught up —"

"Wait, spring semester? What do you mean?" I shook my head, struggling to understand what he was proposing. "Are you saying I have to retake Freshman year? Why can't I join the Sophomores?"

"Mia, you missed two whole years' worth of education," Principal Morita pointed out, frowning. "Skipping the Eighth Grade is a reasonable request, you've proved that well enough, but jumping to the grade of your choosing is asking a bit much. And besides, these are classes you can't afford to miss. Here at Midtown, most of the Freshman curriculum is prerequisite for the more advanced classes down the line. And considering the material they cover, it would only be fair to give you enough time to learn—"

"I was at the top of my class," I interrupted him again, getting an eye twitch in return. Aunt May rested a hand on top of mine, and I glanced back to see that I was leaning so far forward I'd nearly left my seat. Back to Morita, I looked him hard in the eye and continued, "Back at Jefferson, I was in the 95th percentile. I spent two weeks sick studying for that first SHSAT, and I still got offers to Brooklyn and Stuyvesant. I knew I should be extremely grateful for the favor they did, but right now I was just embarrassed. And you said yourself that my latest scores were off the charts."

"Y-yes, well," Morita stammered, then cleared his throat. Possibly he was starting to regret telling me that. "Most older prospects tend to score higher on the SHSAT, it's not entirely unprecedented —"

"So? Can the current Freshman get that same score, if they took the test now?" I demanded, my fists clenching. I heard Aunt May murmur something to me but I didn't catch it; I was too caught up in the moment, trying to hold back the panic. I didn't fight goddamn tanks just to be held back in high school. "Now, I'm older and smarter, and I've got plenty of time on my hands. Whatever I need to pass the Freshman classes with, I don't need a year to do it. Do you understand? I can take those finals — I'll pass them by the end of November. You already thought I deserve a seat here at Midtown. Give me a chance to prove it."

I was on my feet now, pressing a finger onto his desk — and didn't even realize it until this exact moment. Suddenly embarrassed, I sat back down, resting my hands in my lap. As an afterthought, I
concluded in a tiny voice. "...Please."

Morita's eyebrows rose, and then continued to rise until I was finished. He blinked, surprised, as I sat. He was left there, silent for a moment, somewhat pale-faced. I couldn't quite understand the stricken look on his face, but it occurred to me that maybe I sounded a little demanding.

Had I come off too intense? It was a bit intense, wasn't it? I was so used to fighting grown adults and taking things by force that using similar tactics on regular civilian adults may have lead to some unintentional intimidation.

Taking a second to recompose himself back to a dignified state, Morita readjusted his tie and said, "...Er, M-Mia, I really can't advise that. That's just too much work to ask from a young student."

"I can handle it." I said, staring at Morita right in the eye. He had to know I meant it. He had to know I was capable. Intimidating or not, he had to know that for me, nothing was impossible. "Trust me, with all the free time I have, I'll get caught up in no time. I've fallen behind a dozen times before, and I always get back, every time. I've never had to retake a grade. I know I can do it."

"Mia," Aunt May's hand on mine squeezed, and I had to force myself back into my seat so I could look at her. She spoke softly, so as not to antagonize. "I think Principal Morita has a point. You've been through so much..."

"You don't understand." I looked between the two of them, starting to feel a little desperate again. "I need this. I can't stay home, bored all day. Having school, having work to do, I'll be busy. I'll feel normal again. And I can't be behind Peter. We're always in the same year together. All my friends are in Sophomore year now. I want to be with them."

Morita bit his lip, but finally caved. Maybe that last bit preyed on his sympathies, but it was the truth. I didn't want to end up like an overgrown weed amongst a sea of freshmen I didn't know.

He heaved a sigh. "Okay, fine. I'll see that you're placed in with the Year 2016. But there's still this last semester you have to account for. I can allow you retaking one year's worth of classes, but this, too? I'm sorry, Mia, but you'll need an alternative if you want to pass this semester as well."

I slumped back in my seat, all out of ideas. I was so concerned just wanting to stay in my old class that I had underestimated everything I needed to do. I had missed two years, but in reality, I had lost a lot more than that. I had never been this far behind before. The longest I'd missed school was six weeks. Principal Morita really meant it — I was two grades behind everyone else.

But I knew myself better than anyone. I was smart. Maybe I didn't push myself that hard before, but if I put all my effort behind it, I knew I could make this work. Somehow. Some way.

I just needed the opportunity.

"What alternatives do you suggest?" Aunt May finally piped in, giving me relief. As always, the level-headed adult was there to guide the conversation to agreeable results.

Morita still seemed to be thinking about. He shuffled those papers, tapping his fingers against the top of his desk. "Well, obviously if you want to stay in the class, you need to meet the class requirements and hours, but I can waive those due to your...well, special circumstances. Really, what we need to see at Midtown is your level of effort, and a lean on developing leadership skills, becoming an active member of the community. It's why we put such an emphasis on extra curriculars, clubs and teams and the like."

Immediately, thoughts of my last fight with Peter and Mom came to me, and my stomach filled with
dread. I clenched the armrests of the chair with the hauntings of old stress. I really didn't want to have to go through all that again.

"Again, though," he added, with some regret, while I tried to hide my smile of relief. "It's a bit late to be joining teams. Not that I don't encourage it, of course, you should certainly find more to occupy yourself if that's what you want, Mia. But I'm thinking something more focused. If you really trust your studying skills, then perhaps you could try tutoring?"

I blinked, surprised. "Tutoring? As in, t-teaching other kids?"

"Yes," Principal Morita smiled again. He seemed pleased that I was no longer interrupting him anymore. "It's not a popular option, and it takes a certain mentality and patience, but it's definitely a learning experience all on its own. If you can teach yourself a semester's worth of classes in just a few weeks, then I'd like to see you help other students with similar problems."

Although he was phrasing it diplomatically, I could hear the challenge behind the thin veil. Morita was still doubtful of my claims, and he was pushing me even beyond my own goal. Why? To see if I could really do it? Or to fail, and prove him right, that I belonged back in Freshman year?

Well, to hell with that.

"Sure," I said, trying not to grin too big, in case my enthusiasm revealed the intense levels of spite beneath. Teach myself and other students? Done deal. "That sounds like something I can do. I didn't know Midtown had a tutoring program, though."

"We do, but it's tied with Stark Industries Student Outreach program," Morita said, nodding. "They provide services for students around the world, not just for Midtown, and allows children and teachers to connect worldwide. The vetting process is simple, and you're paired with another student, based on your strengths and their needs. It's highly personalized to ensure the best results for both parties. You might end up with someone in this school, you might not. But I certainly think it's something worth trying."

"So, how long do I have to do this?"

"Reasonably, for the rest of the semester," Morita said. "But passing requires a good review from both the student you're helping and the supervisor who assigned you. Obviously, if you fail to meet the stated goals or objectives of your paired student, or there's a catastrophic problem your supervisor cannot resolve, then you'll have to retake this semester. But if it goes well, you're free to continue participating in the program. Personally, I don't think you'll come into many problems, Mia. From what I've heard, you work well in small group settings."

"I do?" I said, before wincing at myself. I wasn't sure where he could've heard that from, but it didn't sound entirely incorrect. I could work well with people, when I wanted to. It just depended on who they were. "Well, okay then. That sounds fair."

"Good," Morita said, and Aunt May squeezed my hand again, giving me a victorious smile. "I'll see that you're set up for an interview at Stark Industries, and we can go through the paperwork, see how soon we can get you back on track. Heck, if everything goes well, maybe you rejoin Midtown by the end of this week."

That was the best thing I'd heard in ages.
"So, how do I look?"

Aunt May and Peter turned as I stepped out of my room Thursday morning. November 22nd. First day of school.

I was dressed simply. No need to make a big deal out of my return, right? Just wearing the new clothes I got when I went shopping with Aunt May, right after the meeting with Principal Morita. Aunt May had been in such good spirits that I couldn't deny her when she wanted to buy me a nice pair of flat shoes and a formal dress — things I didn't ever see myself wearing, but decided to humor her nonetheless.

Those weren't what I wore today. It was just a new pair of jeans (one that wasn't covered in holes and blood) and some Chucks — bright yellow, Mom’s favorite color. And, of course, her old NYU sweatshirt.

Even though looking at it still made me choke up a little bit, I knew I had to wear it today. And, incredibly, it fit now. The hem fell at my hips instead of mid-thigh like they used to. The sleeves were the right length now, but I had stretched out the cuffs with my constant worrying that they no longer fit around my wrists, so I rolled them up to my elbows. The fit was no longer baggy.

Although my hair was still cut unevenly (still too short to get a trim, in my opinion), a good brushing made me at least look presentable, even put-together.

And as the icing on the cake, I'd finally taken off the bandage over my brow. It had only been a week, but the angry red wound had healed into a much less grisly pink-tinged scar. The burns had faded to only some slight redness and bruising. The cuts on my knuckles had faded to calluses. Super soldier regeneration at its work. I'd removed the stitches myself, and was preparing myself for the reaming Aunt May would give me for doing something so stupid.

Instead, Aunt May gasped, hands flying to her face. "Oh, look at you! God, you look so grown up!"

Behind her, Peter grinned, giving me two thumbs up. "Ned's gonna freak when he sees you."

"He will not," I threw him a disgruntled look.

Aunt May was already fetching the camera from the kitchen, and waving me over into the living room. "Come over here, Mia, I'm taking a picture of the both of you."

"What? A picture?" I almost groaned, but shuffled over obediently. "Is this really necessary?"

"This is the first we've had since you got back," Aunt May pointed out, holding out her hand and guiding me (without actually touching me) next to Peter against the wall of books. Aside from the glasses, he still looked the same, with the sweaters over button-up shirts. As May held up the camera, Peter and I simultaneously made silly faces — without a word shared between us but with absolutely perfect timing, I stuck my tongue out and Peter pulled a hilarious grimace, just as the camera flashed.

"You guys!" Aunt May complained, throwing back her head and looking towards the ceiling as if calling for help. "Did you plan that? Honestly, sometimes I think you two are telepathic…"

We tried for a second picture, and this time I made a real attempt to look nice, with a genuine smile. Of course, I didn't know Peter was holding up bunny ears behind my head until Aunt May showed
me the camera's screen afterwards. I wanted to do another one, but Aunt May must have decided to take revenge for our earlier shenanigans, and chose this picture as the keeper.

"Are you sure you want to wear this thing?" Aunt May asked me later, just before we left. She was currently inspecting my green utility jacket. I wanted to keep it, although it seemed she might need convincing before she'd let me wear it again. May sniffed it and wrinkled her nose. "Why does this smell like gunpowder? I swear, I've washed this three times already and I just can't get rid of it."

"It's okay, it doesn't bother me," I said, making grabby-hands for it. I didn't want to snatch it away, and make her even more suspicious.

Aunt May gave the jacket one last scowl before handing it to me. "Well, if you say so. I stitched up some of the holes. I don't know how you managed to get them all the same size like that…"

I didn't have the guts to tell her the holes, all exactly nine millimeters in size, were from bullets. It would make her a little less lenient about the smell, probably.

"Must be magic," I just smiled as I shrugged it on, then grabbed my backpack and headed out the door. "See you later, Aunt May!"

Peter was still pretty pleased with himself about the picture, so I decided to hide the fact that I'd gotten over my annoyance by the time we reached school. It was actually kind of funny, but I couldn't let Peter know that; he'd already thought himself clever for getting away with it.

"So, the interview's on Saturday, right?" He asked, opening up his locker.

Midtown High was exactly as I remembered it from a tour three years ago. The brightly-lit hallways, the cheery handmade banners, scrap paper littering the floor. I even spotted the tiger mascot tearing down the hallway at one point. I had already seen some of it when I'd met with Principal Morita, but I noted the flyers for the winter dance, and the multiple images of the Avengers — Iron Man, Captain America, Thor, Hulk, the others I couldn't name — scattered throughout.

They were popular here. They were heroes.

But there was nothing to show that anyone here remembered why the Avengers were needed. There was no sign of the Incident in these halls.

I wasn't sure if I was okay with that or not.

"Yeah, at 1PM. It's at Stark Tower." My back was pressed against the wall of lockers, clutching my new textbooks to my chest and keeping an eye out for anyone I knew. A sea of faces passed me by — most I didn’t recognize, a few I did, but no friends yet.

I got a lot of stares in return. I could hear them whispering, even from down the hall.

"Who's she?"

"Who's that?"

"Who's the new girl?"

"I don't know, never seen her before."

"I didn't know we were getting someone new."

"We're not. Didn't you hear? She used to go here."
"Really? I don't recognize her."

"No way. I would've noticed someone like her before. She has to be new."

It was kind of funny, in a way. I smiled to myself. No one knew who I was.

Peter's voice brought me back to the present. "That's awesome. I got my internship the same way, actually. Hey, maybe you'll actually get to meet Tony Stark!"

I threw him a doubtful look. "I don't think Tony Stark does interviews for high school tutors."

Peter just shrugged, pulling out a binder and stuffing his backpack inside. I kept my own backpack over one shoulder. I didn't have much besides my new supplies. I hadn't even visited my locker yet — it was halfway across the school and for some reason I was too scared to go alone, even though I knew the way like the back of my hand.

"Well, no, but you might see him!" Peter grinned. "I'd go with you, if I could, but I have Academic Decathlon on Saturday from noon to two."

I gaped at him, my eyebrows flying up. "Shut up. You did not join Decathlon."

He tried to hide the blush rising up his neck by slamming his locker door shut and bending down to pick up his books. "Uh, yeah. I figured why not. Might be fun."

"It's fun, all right." I threw him a skeptical look, failing to hide a smirk. "Especially when Liz is there, right?"

"What?" Peter yelped, whirling on me, expression not unlike I'd caught him with his hand in the cookie jar. "How'd you know?"

"Well, you just told me," I said with a wink, pulling away from the locker wall to face him. Then I leaned in a little and added in a whisper, "Also Ned texted me the other day."

"Oh, right," Peter made a face, apparently forgetting the last time we talked about this. He looked displeased to have been snitched on. "That's not lame, is it? I mean, she's the Team Captain. She knows my name now. She thinks I'm pretty good."

I just gave him a playful nudge in the shoulder. "Oh, it's not lame, Peter. As long as it's fun for you, right? And if Liz thinks you're a good addition, then who's to complain? Not like you have marching band to worry about anymore."

"Did Aunt May tell you —" Peter opened his mouth to complain, but was cut off by a new voice.

"Hey, can you move? You're standing in front of my locker?"

I turned around, surprised to see Ned giving me a glum look. He looked tired, maybe after spending another night up late playing video games. And his hair was a little longer. But aside from that, he looked exactly the same, with the Darth Vader shirt and floppy sneakers. I smiled at him, stepping back. "Hey, Ned."

He blinked up at me, squinting uncertainly. He didn't return my smile. "Uh, sorry? Do I know you?"

My smile faltered. Peter peeked out over my shoulder, pointing at me. "Dude, come on. Don't you recognize her?"

Ned's frown deepened as he glanced from Peter, to me, to Peter, and back again. Then he did a
double-take, eyes widening, mouth falling open in an enormous gasp. "Holy shit! Mia! That's you! W-wow!"

His arms were around me in an instant, and then he was pulling away again, looking me up and down, face red with embarrassment. "I'm sorry! I just, I didn't know you were so tall now...God, you could totally beat up Astor now."

I let out a burst of surprised laughter, then inner pain when I remembered she was here, too. Dammit. Couldn't win every battle, I guess. "I won't have to if I can avoid her."

"I doubt it, she likes picking on new kids." Ned snorted as he started spinning the door lock. "I totally would've recognized you if, you know, somebody ever told me…"

Ned threw Peter a sidelong glance.


"Yeah, sure it did. It's not like Mia went from Hobbit to Elf in two years…"

"Very funny," I rolled my eyes. Honestly, I was a little embarrassed, too, and not just from Ned's comments. For some reason, it hurt that he didn't recognize me. At first, it was funny to me, but only because it had been just random kids I didn't know.

I just hoped people wouldn't be too weird to me. I wasn't used to being the new kid, and not the new kid with my kind of baggage. How would everyone else treat me?

This day was going to be a day of a lot of firsts.

My new science teacher, Mr. Harrington walked right up to me when I first sat down in his Chemistry II class, sitting right next to Peter. In a checkered sweater vest and wire-frame glasses, he looked dorky and slightly older than he probably was, but looked friendly nonetheless. With a great big grin on his face, Mr. Harrington greeted me with much aplomb, even shaking my hand like I was some sort of associate, then asking if I had any questions. I didn't; I just wanted to go to my seat before too many people started to stare. But not before he introduced me to the front of the class, of course, while I just stood there awkwardly and waved.

Thankfully, it was over within minutes. As I shuffled to the empty seat next to Peter, Mr. Harrington bustled right along to the topic at hand. "Now, I know today's topic may be over your head, but I'm sure Peter can catch you up. We'll be taking plenty of notes in this class…"

It wasn't the worst experience, although I felt a little silly, getting the special treatment. Mr. Harrington, bless his heart, did his best to accommodate me, giving me extra notes, and even reintroducing me to the class when everyone was settled. I got to sit and stare at the floor while everyone clapped awkwardly, before exploding into a series of questions that I was never going to answer. It was strange how...normal it all felt. I got a sudden sense of nostalgia as I pulled out my new tape recorder and turned it on; my old one had been lost, but having this was like a security blanket. Made me feel safe. Some things never changed.

It was, of course, Astor who made that class memorable. She came in late as usual (I forgot that about her), and has passed right in front of me when heading to her desk. It was only when she sat down, heard Mr. Harrington's announcement, did she go rigid, then spin in her seat and gape at me. "Holy shit, Measles?"

I heard Peter's intake of breath before I felt my own reaction. He knew just how much I hated
hearing that. I tried my best to just ignore her, my usual tactic, but Astor wasn't done.

"Wow," she laughed, shaking her head. Whispers rattled up and down the classroom. Everyone knew Astor — she always had something to say, and they knew our animosity to know she was about to roast me alive. "I can't believe it, Mia, I gotta hand it to you, you're pretty brave coming here looking like that. If I were you, I'd never show my face here again."

"Looking like you, neither would I."

I was so loud. The words were out of my mouth before I could stop myself. No chance to take it back. A chorus of stifled gasps and snickers filled the room. Even Mr. Harrington let out a surprised snort, which he quickly covered behind a fist, pretending to clear his throat. Peter and Ned, meanwhile, had collapsed into each other, wheezing so hard they nearly fell off their chairs.

"Ex-cuse me?" Astor's face went beet-red. She was halfway out of her seat, hands gripping the back of her chair with such a force her knuckles had gone white.

I fixed her with a hard look. "Did I stutter?"

Astor stared at me, and incredibly, fell back into her seat. For a moment there, I was actually worried she might attack me. It wouldn't be the first time she took a swing at someone. But maybe she, too, realized I was finally bigger than her. If it ever got physical, it'd be a fight I would win. For once in her life, Astor was rendered speechless.

Thank God for small mercies.

"Uh, okay everyone, let's calm down now," Mr. Harrington called, raising his hands to quiet down the titters still erupting here and there. Despite the upset, the class resumed with surprising order. I sat in the front of the class, but I could feel everyone's eyes on me as I studied my worksheet.

It was a lot less pleasant in English class, when I finally ran into Flash.

This time, I didn't have Peter to rely on for any funny commentary. So, I sat alone in one of the middle tables, keeping my head down and reading the first pages of *The Odyssey* while waiting for everyone else to fill in.

For my part, I did actually try reading it, an unusual attempt for me, since English was still my weakest subject (despite all the Crucible’s efforts. Ha). While Morita said I didn't have to catch up with all the homework I missed, I still had to keep up with the amount of homework I now received upon returning to school — on top of studying for last year’s tests, and preparing for my tutoring job.

Anyways, all thoughts of actual study came to an abrupt stop when the chair opposite me creaked loudly. It skidded a little on the tile as the new body slid right in. In a fake-deep voice, Flash said, "Hey, there."

I looked up, scowling. Flash was all laid-out, chin on his fist as he eyed me up and down. He’d grown, too, since I last saw him at the beginning of Eighth grade. Taller, with better hygiene, less acne, and a stronger jaw. A fashion sense, too, although maybe that was a double-edged blade. Flash looked too smooth, with the pressed polo shirts and slicked back hair. All he was missing was the football jacket to complete the douchebag look — but everyone knew Flash cared too much for his appearance to get dirty playing sports.

"Hey, Flash." I replied, my voice as dull and unenthusiastic as I ever was to see him again. Yet I couldn't help but shift awkwardly as he continued to give me that strange look. It took me a moment to realize what he was doing.
"Oh my God. Flash Thompson is checking me out."

"So, you already know my name," He said with a patented self-satisfied smirk. I had to fight the rising urge to kick his seat out from under him. "But I have yet to learn yours, beautiful."

Kill me.

"We've already met," I said, unable to keep from glaring. After dealing with Astor, I didn't have the energy to relive the experience with Flash and every other bully in this school.

"Mmm," Flash pressed his lips together, scrunching up his face before shaking his head. "No, I think I'd remember a face as striking as yours."

A muscle twitched under my eye. Was he flirting with me? Is this what flirting was like? I already decided I didn't like it, but I was too stunned to come up with a clever comeback.

Wham! A pile of books came crashing down in the seat next to me, making the both of us jump.

"It's Mia, you thick-skulled troglodyte." Michelle rolled her eyes so hard she fell backwards into her seat next to me. She blew some off some hair that fell in her face. Her gray sweater was filled with holes, and her pants were covered in paint, but somehow, she made it look effortless. If she was wearing make-up, it was subtle enough to look natural. Two years had done Michelle much better than Flash. Maybe even me. How? How could anyone be that good?

I couldn't believe how relieved I was to see her.

"W-what?" Flash straightened in his seat, staring at me. It took him a moment to make the connection, and he recoiled. "No — no way. Measles Mia? Since when do you look like that?"

That as in not-sick, as in not-ugly, as in not-weak. Not silly, stuttering Measles Mia. My hands clenched around my book, and I had to keep myself from tearing the delicate paperback. I did not like being reminded of that stupid nickname again. I snapped my book shut, rising a little as well. Although we were still seated, it was clear I had become taller than Flash, too. Never before had I appreciated such a change until now.

I didn't say a word, but Flash seemed rightly cowed by the same discovery. He just sat there, gaping at me like a fish, pushing his seat back with his feet.

"You can go away now." Michelle fixed Flash with a cool look, flicked her fingers at him as if he were an unsightly bug. "Shoo."

With no other recourse to follow, Flash obeyed, eyes cast downward as he retreated to another seat across the room, as far away as he could get from me.

I glanced at Michelle, then back at my book, opening to a random page. Of all the people I thought would recognize me, she had never made the list. I never thought I'd be that memorable in her life. And then she just did that, like it was nothing? I almost felt like my old self again, feeling too tiny for the world.

My voice was small when I finally said, "Thanks."

"Don't mention it," Michelle replied, opening up her copy of The Odyssey without so much as another look at me. I thought that was it, until she said, "Badass scar, by the way. How'd that happen?"
"Got punched off a bridge."

"Nice." She nodded approvingly.

"Thick-skulled troglodyte?" I cocked an eyebrow.

She flashed me a wicked smile. "Been saving that one for weeks."

"Nice."

She offered her fist. I bumped it with mine.

I didn't know what just happened, but I was pretty sure Michelle and I just became friends.

Maybe we always had been.

---

Before and After - sheet of Mia's change in appearance by chapter, with a Peter for reference :) 

Art by me
Chapter Thirty-Eight

Chapter Summary

Whirling Winds / Ludovico Einaudi  
https://open.spotify.com/track/515hkGoOhAuUtiqrfKFiTG

Chapter Notes

I wanted to thank everyone for getting me to 200 reviews (and counting)! I read every single one of them and I love going back and reading them again ^_^  
Since so many of you are asking questions now, I’ll add a Q&A at the end of this chapter, make sure I clear some things up lol, since I haven’t been able to state them clearly before.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stark Tower.

I stood in front of its entrance, looking up at the silver skyscraper. Although half of it was still under repair, it was a hell of a thing to see up close. It's smooth, futuristic design was carried through from top to bottom. The lobby entrance had an outdoor pavilion filled with water fountains, metal benches, and abstract stone sculptures. Standing pillars of glass displayed holograms advertising different aspects of Stark Industries, as well as an introduction to the Avengers. Apparently, this was going to be their official home, but regular business would still be continued at the Tower.

It was bizarre to think about. On one floor there was an office full of IT tech people, or a bank, or a cafeteria. How could you go work there every day, knowing fifty floors above you there lived half a dozen of the most powerful, most extraordinary people on Earth? That it began its life as the epicenter to the world's first alien invasion?

I shook my head. And now I was having an interview here.

I checked my watch (new Gortex, waterproof) before taking a deep breath, and heading inside. Aunt May had almost convinced me to wear a dress for the interview, but I managed to squeeze by in a pair of blue pants and a matching blazer. They were the only "professional” clothes I owned, but they were brand-spanking-new, and I happened to like the way my shoulders looked in a well-fitted jacket. I couldn't get away from her blow-drying my hair though, so now I looked even older with smooth, shiny hair. I was afraid that someone would think I was lying about being a high school
School had gone well, all things considered. By the end of the week, everyone knew who I was, or who I was supposed to be, although I was still getting looks and stares. Peter said it'd go away eventually, but I wasn't so sure.

At least in Stark Tower, I felt safe in my relative anonymity. The Welcome Center atrium had a high-reaching ceiling, with multiple decks and an echoing, raucous acoustics. It was loud, and kind of reminded me of an airport, or a stadium. There were hundreds of people just on this one floor. Tours and walkthroughs, rushing businessmen, lunch kiosks and help-desks and more of those glass hologram things. Everything was cutting edge — everything was metal or transparent, in silvery tones, with flashes of bold colors like red, gold, or blue. I sought directions from one of the desk attendants, then took an elevator to the 54th floor — where the Student Outreach program was housed.

The elevator was much quieter and it wasn't until the doors closed with a slight sucking sound and all noise vanished beneath soft Muzak did I realize how antsy just walking in here made me. The lobby had left me rattled, with my ears ringing and a headache starting to form.

I knew what it was called. Sensory overload. I read about it in Science class in Seventh Grade. Until now, I'd never really experienced it before.

Zipping up to the 54th floor, I stepped out of the elevator thirty seconds later, and found myself in a much more manageable atmosphere.

The ceiling was at a reasonable height, with a smaller lobby and less flashing, moving things for my eyes to take in. There were wide windows on the right side, giving the room a sense of breathing space that allowed me to relax a little bit.

I was nervous. There, I said it. I was nervous about the interview. You'd think, after inadvertently sparking a revolution and fighting on top of trains and bridges, I'd be ready for anything. But nope. I couldn't intimidate my way out of this one. Just the thought of sitting down across from a stranger, letting them squint through my resume and ask me strange, life-probing questions no fifteen-year-old is going to have a wise answer to made my skin itch. I didn't want to sit down and be interrogated. I just wanted to get this over with and receive my assignment.

There was a waiting room right outside the elevator, filled with about a dozen other kids my age, as well as some parents and other adults that looked like teachers or advisors. They were all talking, but at least it was quiet, pleasant. I managed to wait my turn before I noticed something out of the corner of my eye.

A mural.

In bright colors with what appeared to be applied with a sponge, it was painted on a wall to the left, near some office doors leading further into the building. I recognized the skyline instantly: New York City. Although the ceiling was only twelve feet high, the mural was large, stretching down the hallway. I turned in my seat to get a better look at it. It wasn't just a mural of New York City.

It was the Incident.

Stark Tower took center stage of the mural. The giant purple hole in the sky, the droves of aliens swarming out. Chitauri. I knew what they were called but it was hard to see them as anything other than a vague, faceless enemy in my mind.
But it wasn't the aliens, or the tiny depictions of the Avengers in battle, but rather the dozens of names that lines the bottom. And the in great, fancy black letters that titled:

\textit{To Those We Lost}

Billowing smoke, buildings on fire. Seventy-three names. A memorial.

A chill went down my spine, and I quickly turned around in my seat, my eyes focused on the floor. I couldn't look at it anymore. This was not how this day was supposed to go. This wasn't what I needed to be thinking about minutes before a job interview.

So, I kept my eyes averted. I pretended to be interested in the magazines on the coffee table, the TV playing on the wall. But I knew it was still there. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. It was like it was watching me. A presence, hanging there, waiting for me to turn around again.

I almost didn't hear it when the secretary called my name — my heart rate had picked up, a new ringing in my ears. It wasn't until she waved at me did I jolt and rise out of my seat on shaky knees.

My breathing was quick, uneven as I approached the desk and the woman pointed down the hall, past the mural, the way to the office, the interview. I didn't turn my head. I couldn't. I didn't want to look at it again.

I didn't want to see my mother's name.

I knew it was there. I knew it was waiting for me.

The worst thing was that I wanted to find her name. I had to see it, just to make sure. Why, I didn't know. I just had to.

But that would only make it worse.

I was already struggling just to breathe. I hadn't moved for a long moment and the secretary was giving me a funny look now. I pulled on an awkward smile before forcing my feet away from her desk and towards the hallway, towards the mural.

I did everything I could not to look. I turned my gaze to the floor, to the ceiling, unfocused my eyes so everything was a blur.

But I was still drawn to the list of names on the bottom of the mural. I passed one after another as I headed down the hallway. Each step was matched to a beat of my frantic heart. What was wrong with me? Why did it feel like I was suddenly running a marathon?

The thoughts rushed in from nowhere. Hell's Kitchen. Rubble. Mom. Her grave. Seeing her laugh and smile over dinner, sitting next to my bed while I was sick, crying over me as I bled out in the ambulance. That was the last thing I remembered of her. Watching her as I died.

The blazer clung to the back of my neck and arms. I'd broken out in a cold sweat, but I couldn't take it off now — not unless I wanted the interviewer to see my tattoo and ruin my professional look.

I wasn't really concerned with looking "professional" right now, however. I was already feeling dizzy, sick. I didn't want to be here anymore.

My hands gripped the armrests. I could barely remember to restrain myself before I accidentally broke something.
I remembered this feeling. Like a rug was being yanked out from underneath me, and I fell back into a terrifying abyss.

The worst part was, I still hadn't figured out how to get out of it.

Guilt. Strong, unrelenting guilt clutched at my chest. About the Incident. I didn't know why. But I'd heard the stories, I'd seen the footage. They still talked about it on the news. Kids at school all had their own versions, of where they were when it happened. Most of them lived outside of Manhattan, so they really only watched. Very few were in the actual thick of it. They were the heroes of Midtown.

Meanwhile, I had been the only one without a story to tell. I hadn’t been in the country. I couldn't even remember the day. I was trapped in the Crucible, drifting in a toxic blur. It probably happened on a day when I'd forgotten I had a family.

But I couldn't tell people that. Whenever someone had asked me where I was, I could only shrug. I'd gotten dirty looks for telling them I didn't remember.

It was like I couldn't get away, I couldn't forget, not even for a moment. Now I could visualize the Incident it clearly in my head. The torn-up streets, the screeching monsters and plummeting behemoths, people trapped and terrified as the entire island was cut off from the rest of the world.

What was it like for Mom? What had she seen before it was over? Had she been stuck at home like everyone else? Had she decided to hide, thinking it was the best thing to do? Hell's Kitchen got hit the worst in the attack. She shouldn't have stayed. I should've done something, anything —

What? What could I have done? There was nothing rational about this. I wasn't even there — I couldn't breathe.

I stumbled, caught myself against the wall with one hand, the other at my throat. I opened my mouth but I couldn't breathe. What the hell was happening? I just — I couldn't breathe. Was I choking?

The only answer I could come up with was: asthma attack.

It was irrational; I didn’t have asthma any more. I couldn’t. Something else was at play here, but my mind was scattering, too busy panicking to find a sane conclusion.

The walls were too close. I could feel it pushing against me, trying to trap me and I pulled away with a sudden jerk. Still gasping for breath, still wondering why it felt like I was drowning.

The halls were narrowing the longer I just stood there. I had to get out of here.

I needed air.

The balcony. The hallway tilted beneath me, but the doors were right there. I went straight for them. I couldn't remember which office I was supposed to go into. I didn't care anymore. I just needed to get out of here.

I slammed into the double doors with the full force of my body, before catching myself on a guardrail to the steps below. The world continued to spin, and I nearly spilled right over the top level of the balcony to the deck below. I gasped, clenching the metal rail in my fists, trying to ground myself as I was suddenly overwhelmed by vertigo and had to close my eyes.

Wind blew in my face. So bitter, so fresh. It hit me like a brick wall. I didn't have my winter coat on.
I'd left inside the waiting room. But it was okay. The chill against my skin was a relief to the suffocating warmth inside.

There was no one out here. I was glad. Finally, the cold was good for something.

"Hey, miss, are you all right?"

Or so I thought.

I didn't see who spoke, and I could only shake my head silently, crumpling against the railing as my knees gave out beneath me. The outdoor air was welcoming but my heart was still racing. I couldn't calm down. My instincts were telling me to run run run but from what? There was nothing here. There was nothing here and even if there was I couldn't see them I couldn't see anything I couldn't do anything I couldn't get home I couldn't get to Mom I wasn't fast enough I didn't know I didn't know I didn't know —

"Whoa, hey, it's okay, it's okay!" the voice said, drawing closer, like some invisible ghost swooping in on a cloud of warmth. I felt the presence of a hand on my shoulder, gently guiding me to the floor. "Just sit down, okay?"

I wanted to laugh but my chest was so locked up I could only take quick, shuddering breaths.

"Can you tell me what's wrong?" he asked. Male voice, I finally managed to parse. Older, soft, soothing. Like someone who's done this before. When I couldn't answer his question, he continued, "Miss, you're hyperventilating. You need to slow down or you're going to pass out. Just take it slow. One breath at a time. In and out. In, out."

I could already feel it coming. The light-headedness, the tingle in my hands and feet, my loosening grip on the railing. The way the world just wanted to slip out from beneath me like a treadmill going too fast.

But I could still feel his touch, and I leaned into it, even as I hung my head, squeezed my eyes tighter, swallowed against the lump in my throat. Took a deep, shaky breath, released it slow. The voice said, "Good, good. Keep doing that, you're doing great."

It went on like that for a little bit. The world stopped swaying after a while, and I could finally let go of the railing, my hand cramped from the taut muscles. I didn't even realize my eyes were open, that I was seeing, until I touched my face and found myself back on the balcony, with a man sitting next to me, watching me with a concerned but encouraging smile.

"You're okay," he said, patting me on the shoulder. The red star was a burning glare against the cool gray of the balcony around me. I frowned, bleary, confused. When had I taken off my jacket? "It was just a panic attack."

I finally took him in for the first time, getting a good look. He seemed about middle-aged, with dark curly hair graying at the temples. He peered at me over a pair of black spectacles, this sort of inquisitive — but kind — expression on his face. The face of a man that, for some reason, made me feel instantly at ease. Considering how he'd just helped me out, maybe he just had that sort of natural air.

"P-panic attack?" I repeated, startled by how hoarse my voice sounded. I wiped at my face and discovered I had been crying. Jesus. "What? That was...I thought it was just asthma..."

I knew it wasn't, even before the man snorted. "Well, if it was, that was one of the worse asthma attacks I've ever seen. Do you need any help? You should probably go home to recover."
"N-no!" I went ramrod straight, scrambling to my feet in a rush. But I overestimated myself, lost my balance, and caught the railing for support. My head swam, and I had to fight back a wave of nausea. The man rose slowly after me, looking increasingly concerned as I shook my head. "I-I have an interview today. I c-can't miss it, I can't —"

"Look, I think they'd understand," he tried to reason with me, scratching the back of his head. "A panic attack is a good reason to reschedule, if you ask me. They deal with young kids all the time here. Is this your first interview?"

I swallowed, trying to calm myself again, and nodded mutely.

"So, nerves, then," The man shrugged with a smile, as if that were all it was. As if he had any idea. But I understood what he saw. Just a freaked-out kid not ready to be an adult.

"Not exactly," I said, turning my face away. My mouth was completely dry. My fingers had gone stiff with cold but I couldn't pull them from the rail. "I-I saw that mural in the office b-back there, and it...I don't know, it just..."

"Oh," the man said, his chin rising as it dawned on him. By the tone of his voice, I didn't have to explain what it was about. "I'm sorry. Were you there?"

"No."

My answer was curt, and he gave me an odd look, as if not expecting that answer. He stuffed his hands in his pockets, clearly unsure what to do with this information. Again, he said, "Oh."

After a pause, he finally intuited the truth. "You lost someone."

It wasn't even a question, like he just knew. I opened my mouth to say 'yes', but nothing came out. He seemed to understand, nodding without a word. A silence fell between us as my heart rate finally leveled out again. I broke the quiet with, "Were you there?"

"The Incident? Yeah," The man nodded, pursing his lips and looking away. "Not gonna lie, it kinda sucked."

A giggle escaped my mouth, although it sounded a little teary. In order to save face, I bent down and picked up my fallen blazer, wrapping it around my hands. My fingers were so cold I couldn't feel the texture of the fabric, and I started rubbing them together to warm them up.

He cleared his throat. "Well, if you want to save that interview, I guess you can always go back inside. Although in my professional opinion, I think you're better off taking a break. Maybe come back when you feel better?"

That was unacceptable. But he was right. I just gave him a befuddled look, "What are you, a doctor?"

"Of a sort,"

I frowned at him. He didn't look like a doctor — no white lab coat, nothing that indicated he worked in either science or medicine. Just a jacket, button-up shirt, pair of jeans. He was even wearing a bare of worn green sneakers, like a dorky soccer dad. I glanced up at the building, then back at him. "Y-you work here?"

"Uh," he paused, then said, "Not exactly. Look, I don't know what's really going on, but I can call you a cab if you want —"
"Pretending to be a doorman now, Bruce?" came a new voice. I jumped as the doors behind us burst open and out walked a dark-haired man in a black suit. "What, life here isn't keeping you occupied enough?"

I didn't recognize him until he breezed right past me, playing on his tablet. I blinked several times, turning on the spot to watch him pass, my jaw dropping.

Tony Stark.

The man, Bruce, just rolled his eyes. I stared at him, too. He knew Tony Stark? Who the heck was he? "Very funny. I was just helping this young lady here."

"Oh yeah?" Tony Stark stopped on the lower deck, turning around to face me with a quirked eyebrow. He looked me up and down, apparently sizing me up, then threw a doubtful expression at Bruce. "With what?"

Bruce opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again, then gestured vaguely in my direction. He was too awkward to speak on my behalf, and I froze for a second, before answering, "I-I had a panic attack. I was here for my interview, for the mentoring p-program, but — but I missed it, I just, I couldn't —"

My stuttering only got worse the longer I talked and I just kept shaking my head like an idiot. It wasn't just my increased nervousness, but being watched by Tony Stark while I continued to fumble the ball — that unreadable expression of his, sort of skeptical, sort of amused. I couldn't tell what he was thinking. Probably that I was an idiot. Realizing I was rambling now, I just closed my eyes and winced. "I-I'm sorry, I know you don't care, you have better things to do —"

"Amelia Fletcher," Tony Stark cut me off. I blinked, startled, but he was busy studying the tablet cradled in his arm. When I didn't answer, his eyes flicked up to me again. "That's your name, isn't it?"

"Uh," I wavered on my feet. "Y-yes?"

It came out like a question. Tony Stark looked unimpressed, going back to his tablet. "What, you aren't sure? Says your interview was twenty minutes ago. Sheryl marked you as absent, but that's clearly not the case...I'll just mark you down as 'late'... panic attack, did you say?"

"Yeah, um," My mouth hung open for a second as I struggled to understand what was going on. Tony Stark was still reading that tablet. Wait, was that my resume? "I didn't mean to — I mean, I know I was supposed to show up but then I just couldn't breathe and —"

"Eh, don't worry about it, happens to everyone." Tony Stark waved a dismissive hand, still not looking at me as he scrolled down the page he was reading. "Nice tat by the way."

He gestured at my shoulder, not even looking up, but my hand still went to cover my shoulder in embarrassment. First a panic attack, and now he saw my tattoo. I was as far away from professional as I could get right now. I didn't want to think of how disappointed Aunt May would be when she found out how badly I screwed this up. It was just supposed to be a simple interview. The rules were easy to follow: don't freak out, and don't show your tattoo.

Well, too late for that.

"Kinda punk-rock, I like it," Tony Stark nodded approvingly, which was the last reaction I'd expect from a bold tattoo. But before I could say anything, he forged on with a brusque tone: "Says here you're an honors student at Midtown School of Science and Technology. Good place. Hey, actually
one of my, er, interns work there. Peter Parker, you know him?"

The familiar name was like a shot of adrenaline. I straightened a little, tucking my blazer against my stomach, my shoulders hunching up. "Yeah, P-Peter's my — He's my cousin. I've known him since, uh, forever."

"Cousins?" Tony Stark lifted his head in thought, towards the sky, then back to me. He wagged a finger, saying, "Oh, yeah, I think he might've mentioned you once or twice. Left Happy an hour-long voice message about you coming back from the dead, whatever that means. Kept making Top Gun references."

"It's a, ah, long story."

"Well, nobody has time for one of those, I've got a board meeting to ignore in twelve minutes," Tony Stark went on, checking his watch, before shaking it up his sleeve again. "So, it says here you're fluent in French, Spanish, and Russian. Jeez. What are you, trying to undo the Tower of Babel before you hit twenty? Can you really speak all three?"

"Th-that's correct," I bit my lip, tilted my head. I'd left out Sokovian, feeling that would've been weird to read. Not that it wasn't taught in schools or anything, but 1) it wasn't a lesson Midtown offered and 2) Everyone already knew I'd been in Europe for a while and I didn't want to give them any other ideas. On top of all that, I still wasn't sure what was going on here. "I-Is this an interview?"

"Th-that's correct," I bit my lip, tilted my head. I'd left out Sokovian, feeling that would've been weird to read. Not that it wasn't taught in schools or anything, but 1) it wasn't a lesson Midtown offered and 2) Everyone already knew I'd been in Europe for a while and I didn't want to give them any other ideas. On top of all that, I still wasn't sure what was going on here. "I-Is this an interview?"

"Well, that's the reason why you're here, right?" Tony Stark threw me a look, like I was slow to catch on. "Besides, you look fine to me. So do you usually stutter like that or do you need, like, a glass of water or something? Personally, a shot of whiskey on the rocks usually works for the jitters, but I probably shouldn't be saying that to a minor."

"No, I'm f-fine," I said, hating myself for messing up even that short reply. "It's been like this since I was little. I've been…I've been getting b-better, though."

If this counted as another point against me, Tony Stark didn't let on. Without even addressing that, he asked, "How soon can you start?"

"Anytime," I said immediately. I understood what he said a second afterwards. "Wait, I got the job?"

"Do you want it?"

"Y-yes."

"Then you got the job," Tony Stark said with a curt shrug. He tapped something on to his tablet, waited, then continued, "We've got plenty of mentorship positions open here. Dani needs an assistant for the twelve-and-under groups, and James hosts an English class for immigrants —"

"No."

"No what?" Tony Stark glanced up at me again, frowning.

"I can't work here," I said, gripping the railing to steady myself. Saying 'no' to Tony Stark seemed like a big risk, considering he just gave me a job and could just as easily take it away, but I had to be firm about this. "Not in this building, I mean. I just… I can't."

I couldn't walk in everyday and see that mural. I didn't want to be reminded of this experience every time I came here. I especially didn't want it to happen again.
Surprisingly, this didn't seem to bother Tony Stark. He raised his eyebrows and said, "Hey, fine by me. We got off-site positions, too. How do you feel about a one-on-one job? Just you and another kid."

"S-sounds good to me," I said, relieved, slumping against the railing a little bit. That went over a lot better than I expected. If it had come down to it, I might've rejected the job entirely. The thought of proving Morita right was an unpleasant thought, but having panic attacks sounded a lot worse.

"Fantastic," Tony Stark said, not missing a beat. I couldn't tell if he was annoyed or just straight to business. I decided on the latter, when he added, "We've got a kid on the Upper East Side, Dmitri Kasyanenko — wow, that's a mouthful — recent exchange student from Russia. Needs help with science and math. Sounds like it's right up your alley, Amelia."

"It's Mia," I said weakly. I didn't think everything would be set up so soon. I felt a little off-kilter just trying to keep up.

"Sorry?"

"Mia," I repeated, feeling like an idiot as I forced myself to speak louder. "M-my name. I prefer Mia. O-only my mom calls me Amelia."

"Alrighty then, Mia," Tony Stark took this in stride, just like everything else. He started pacing back and forth in front of me. If the wind chilled him, he gave no indication, although his nose and ears were starting to turn a little pink. "Well, that's simple enough. Pair you with Mr. Kasyanenko and get you on your way. Just need you to sign here."

I was almost alarmed when he walked right up to me and handed me the tablet. I had to force myself to take it from his hands, and with a trembling finger, signed my name on the digital form. Dysgraphia made it look like a fourth-graders' signature. When I handed it back to him, I found myself a little startled to see how...normal Tony Stark was up close. He seemed so imposing and cool on TV, when in reality he was shorter than me. His eyes were about level to my nose. Perhaps realizing this as well, he frowned, looking me up and down again before taking a generous step back. "Right. I'll get this sent to your guardian and whoever runs that school of yours, and you're all set to go. How's today sound?"

"Today?"

"Yeah, you know," Tony Stark rolled his eyes, spun a hand in a circle in the *move-it-along* gesture. "Your job? Hello? You gotta meet the kid first before you can help him."

"Wait, *now*?" I pointed at the floor, aghast. Tony Stark was even more efficient than I first thought. I didn't think everything could be settled in under an hour.

"What, you got something better to do?" Tony Stark threw me a funny look, then flicked his hand towards the door. "Hop to it, Beanstalk, we don't have all day. I've still got that board meeting, remember? Can't keep taking care of you crazy kids. You can pick up your company badge and phone at the desk inside. It's got the address and all the files you need already on it. Why are you still standing here? Vámonos!"

I stumbled a little as I backed up, trying to decide whether to smile with glee or panic again because Tony Stark was operating on a higher, faster level than I was. I was sorely unprepared for the expectations for this job, and yet I was excited to actually be doing something again. But as I turned around, I remembered the other man, Bruce — he was no longer standing behind me anymore. In
fact, he'd completely disappeared.

I paused, frowning, feeling a little sad. And guilty. I didn't even know when he left. "Oh, he's gone. I meant to say thank you."

"Who? Oh, you mean Bruce?" Tony scratched his beard, pulling a face. "Yeah, I'd appreciate it if you didn't tell anyone else he's here. He's kinda got this whole wanted fugitive thing going on, having a tough time convincing the Mayor he's safe to have around. We're trying to keep it on the DL, if you catch my drift."

It took me a moment to comprehend what he said. "Wait, what? Did you say fugitive?"

"Uh, yeah," Tony Stark snorted, like it was obvious. He had already turned his back to me, going back down the steps as he attended to a new task on his tablet. "Bruce Banner, brilliant scientist, exposed to gamma radiation, became big giant scary green thing? Some people call him the Hulk but, eh, I think he could use something a little flashier, you know?"

"Um," I didn't know what to say to that. I was starting to accept that as the norm for being in the presence of Tony Stark. Maybe I was just star-struck (or Stark-struck…? Hahaha I'll show myself out) or maybe the panic attack had taken more out of me than I thought. Either way, I was left a little speechless.

Because, the truth was, Bruce Banner — The Hulk, the same Hulk that destroyed Harlem and helped the Avengers against the Chitauri — just calmed me down from a panic attack.

I was sure there was a joke about irony in there somewhere, but I was too dazed to think of one at the moment.

Tony Stark stopped talking to me, having parked himself on the edge of the balcony, fully engrossed in whatever work he was doing now. Considering myself officially dismissed, I stepped back inside Stark Tower.

I couldn't wait to tell Peter and Ned about this.

✮✮✮

You know, if I'd been anywhere near right in the head today, I would've been able to recognize the address the secretary had given me.

70 Lincoln Center Plaza, New York, NY 10023

For some reason, I thought it was a home address. It wasn't. It was the School of American Ballet. The entire plaza was dedicated to the arts. I knew this. I was a native New Yorker, I knew all the major locations by heart. I've been there before on field trips. But for some reason, the address didn't ring a bell until I finally saw the big square Metropolitan Opera House, with its rounded arches and walls of glass. The circular fountain in the center of the plaza, with the smaller theater and studio halls on either side of me.

I don't know. Maybe it was because I wasn't expecting to be led to a ballet school — the best ballet
school, I should say, because this was one of the fanciest places I've ever been to. Kids who went here learned to become dedicated ballerinas and dancers. It was their entire lives. Meanwhile regular high schoolers like me were stuck sitting in classrooms all day, trying not to pass out from boredom.

It also could've been because I was still recovering from the panic attack, and maybe doing this now wasn't such a good idea. Maybe Bruce Banner (still trying to get over that) had a point. I shouldn't be working right now. I should be resting. Not giving myself more stress to worry about.

But I told Tony Stark I was fine. He believed me, for better or worse, and I wanted the job. If this is what I had to do to keep it — and, more importantly, pass fall semester of Sophomore year — then so be it. I wasn't going to let one panic attack get in the way of my plans.

Getting here took twenty minutes on the subway, which gave me enough time to recompose myself, put my blazer and coat back on, check my hair, and acquaint myself with my new StarkPhone. It was just like Peter's, only brand new and without the spiderweb of cracks all over its screen. It even had my name and basic info already programmed into it.

I'd never owned a phone before. Not a flip phone, certainly not a smartphone. For a brief while, I was completely engrossed with using the touchscreen, tapping the apps, playing with the keyboard and camera. Just before my stop, I sent Peter a text message — guess who i met today — suppressing a smile as I let him stew on that for a while as I walked the rest of the way to the Plaza.

According to the Dmitri Kasyanenko's contact info, most of his classes were held in the Rose building, along with the rest of the school, so that's where I headed first. I would later be redirected to the Koch Theater, when I ran into a teacher who said the mature students were already rehearsing on stage. So, with a resolute sigh, I turned my heel and went back the way I came.

My annoyance evaporated as soon as I stepped inside the great hall.

It was massive. I vaguely remember coming here before for a school trip, but memory hardly served to capture the true majesty of the place. I gaped up as the vaulted ceiling, five stories high, bathed in dark red and gold light. A massive spherical chandelier with small circular lights hung in the center of the room, with a kaleidoscope of diamond tiles spinning away from it. The place was brightly lit, all lights turned on as the hustle and bustle of a main performance was put into construction.

Sound echoed off the walls, a combination of a hundred voices, discordant clips of music, and the banging and sawing noises of props being built.

On stage, crew were set-dressing and dancers were blocking their movements. I spotted the director almost immediately — he was the loudest in the hall, constantly shouting, holding three different conversations at once: with his clipboard-armed assistant, a girl who was holding a pair of worn-out slippers, and the invisible caller on his Bluetooth. He didn't even notice me walking in, and his voice was just another amongst a dozen, all talking over one another. The theater was abuzz, and I wondered how anyone could concentrate under the cacophony.

I didn't know who or where Dmitri Kasyanenko could be. As fancy as Stark's system was, it failed to provide me with photo identification. I'd probably have to ask around, although I dreaded approaching the director — he'd probably know for sure, but I doubt he'd have the time to deal with me. Probably best I left him alone. Maybe I could ask someone else…

Was he a student, a dancer? Or maybe he worked in production. All I knew was that he was sixteen, so at least he'd be easy to pick out from the adults. There were plenty of older dancers here that I could quickly cross off the list of potential Dmitri's, but there were at least two dozen if not more students milling about. Even worse, many were in costume, wearing matching outfits. God, this was
going to be a nightmare.

Smaller children, maybe eight- or nine-years old, were playing in the seats, apparently having nothing better to do as their director slowly lost his mind. A few ran past me, playing tag. I watched then, wincing when one tripped, but then popped right back up again with an ecstatic shriek.

I passed a group of girls chattering in Russian. It took me a moment to actually tell it was a different language, because I was at first engrossed by the scandalous love life of a girl's mother. It made me pause, before moving on. How many students here were international? Did Tony Stark pair me with a Russian kid because his English wasn't so good? It seemed logical, but again, I wouldn't know until I met him. The uncertainty made me squirm a little. How difficult would it be to work with him?

The air was warm, almost humid, with activity, and I pulled off my coat, folding it over my arm. As I drew nearer to the stage, one dancer in particular caught my eye. On the right-hand side of the stage was a tall boy with golden-brown hair, slowly pirouetting on the spot with a simple grace.

I didn't realize I was staring until he turned his head in my direction and smiled. "Hello."

I started a little when I realized this was directed at me. Rocking back on my heels, I smiled awkwardly back and hoped he didn't think I was being creepy. "Uh, h-hi."

Oh, good, with the stutter, now I sounded shy. I wasn't, at least I didn't think so. Good job, Mia.

"Is something wrong?" He asked with a tilt of his head, pausing for a second. He had a slight accent, but its exact nature was muffled by chorus bouncing through the hall. It didn't help that his voice was a little soft, even though I stood only about ten feet away.

"No, no," I quickly shook my head, speaking louder so I could be heard over the noise, and maybe sound more confident in myself. I had to step closer to hear him, coming a stop at the edge of the stage, craning my head to look up at him. "Just, um, just watching you. It's really...you're really good."

Mission: Sound Confident — failed.

I wanted to kick myself for acting so stupid. Couldn't I put a single sentence together? God, I should've quit while I was ahead. Why didn't I tell Tony Stark I needed a short break before starting this? I couldn't function in normal society. I was a total wreck and I was only barely hiding it.

Before I could mentally berate myself further, the boy laughed. "Ah, thank you! They are just warm-ups, but it is good to know I am doing well."

He lifted his arms up in a stretch. Every part of him was elegant and sinewy, lean but not unmasculine. Standing on his toes, in matching black shoes and leotard, made his legs look extended, ethereal, even doll-like. The thin black shirt and leotard outlined every fine, powerful muscle in his shoulders and back. I realized I was staring and quickly averted my eyes, fighting a blush. Oh man, this was not a good time to be admiring boys.

Clearly new to this puberty thing if I'm distracted so easily. The last time I ever had thoughts like that were when I was thirteen. Guess I still was thirteen, in some aspects. I hadn't completely grown out of my old self.

"Do you dance?" He asked, still stretching, now to his arms and shoulders. I could hear it better now, the accent. Russian, too, like those girls. I guessed it made sense. As far as ballet schools went, America and Russia competed with the greatest.
A chuckle rose up my chest before I could stop myself. Me? Dance? No way. "Oh, ha, no, I don't dance. I'd be awful."

The boy had reached around to touch his hand between his shoulder blades, joints folding like rubber. I didn't know it was possible to be so limber, and absentmindedly started reaching behind my own back, to see if I could do it. (I could).

"Have you tried?"

I paused, shrugged. "Uh, no. Not really."

He threw me a look, arching an eyebrow. "Then how would you know if you're awful?" Then he smiled to show he wasn't being critical. "I'm sure you'd be an excellent dancer."

"Oh, yeah?" I said, crossing my arms. While I was sure he wasn't being mean-spirited, I was still frustrated by his light-hearted challenging. Couldn't he just let me be? "How do you know?"

"Because you're an athlete," He said, and at my look he quickly added, "I can tell by the way you carry yourself. You have good balance, and you're steady on your feet. All you need is to know is how to use them."

I decided not to tell him how I used my body to render a human unconscious with a maximum of three blows. I was also a little disconcerted by how easy I had been to read, but hid it behind a scoff. "Ha, okay, sure. I think I'm good, thanks."

The boy just shrugged, "Well, suit yourself," and returned to stretching his back, bending forward to reach the floor.

I frowned, brow drawing together. While he didn't push the notion, it still felt like he won the argument — I had no *savoir faire* and I was pretty sure I just made a faux pas, being too defensive. And I sort of liked talking to this guy, despite my own wishes.

But I just shook my head, looked away. What the hell was I doing? Wasting my time with this guy when I should be here looking for that Kasyanenko kid. I could always go to the director, who was right there, although I still had the distinct feeling I'd get kicked out just for approaching to him…

"Are you here for something?" The boy's voice cut through my thoughts, effectively ending any chance I had at coming up with a comeback. I looked back at him; the boy was sitting on the floor now, bending one knee and reaching for the other foot. He craned his head around to look at me from over his shoulder.

"I'm looking for someone. His name is Dmitri Kasyanenko. Do you know him?"

"Yes." The boy frowned, pulled up. "Wait, you're Amelia, aren't you? Amelia Fletcher?"

I did a double-take, my arms dropping. "What? How did you know my name?"

"God, how rude of me — I should've realized, said something sooner." the boy muttered under his breath, shaking his head and standing up with a look of dawning comprehension on his face. I took a hesitant step back as he jumped off the stage and strode right up to me, holding out his hand with a smile. "Because I'm Dmitri."

He looked even younger up close, now. A thin face, prominent cheekbones, freckles like mine. Only his mouth was too wide, his chin a little too small. He was...pretty. Not all the way to handsome, but certainly attractive; Maybe he took after his mother.
"Oh. Oh." My jaw dropped, and after a moment, I took his hand, feeling like a complete idiot. I was utterly flustered, both by my own actions and those bright hazel-green eyes, looking right into mine.

Finally, his accent clicked in my head. Oh, so that's why they wanted someone who could speak Russian in the program. But after holding a conversation in perfect English with Dmitri, I wasn't sure why. He seemed just fine on his own.

Once I recollected my thoughts, I said, "Well, I must have given you a great first impression, then. Um, s-sorry a-about acting like that."

I felt like I blew already it, that nothing I said could fix this. Even worse, my stutter had made an encore, as it always did when I was nervous. Not even super soldier serum could save me from that.

Of course, it had to be him, Dmitri had to be the one guy I really noticed, the one that made me stare and blush, and then act like a bitch to. I had expected someone with a thicker accent, a shy personality — someone who needed a Russian speaker, to communicate better, open up with. Maybe it was a little stereotypical — but that was the impression I had gotten from Tony Stark.

"No, no, I apologize," Dmitri said with light chuckle, waving his hands in front of him. "I should not have pressed you like that. I tend to ask too many questions. I should know by now that not many people appreciate that."

"What? No, asking too many questions is a good thing." I replied almost immediately, now feeling guilty for an entirely different reason. The last thing I needed was a guy too afraid to ask me questions, especially if I was going to be teaching him. His success meant my success, after all.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets, added with what I hoped was a reassuring smile. "Trust me, I do it all the time."

Dmitri looked surprised. "You do? And you don't get in trouble for it?"

"Ah," I hesitated, then added with a duck of my head. "...Well, no. I still get in trouble. But that's only because most people are hiding things they shouldn't be having in the first place."

"Well, that's an interesting method," Dmitri said after a moment of consideration, looking mildly impressed. Then he leaned in with a teasing smile, and whispered conspiratorially, "In that case, I hope neither of us has any secrets they should have from each other."

Oh, boy. If he had winked, I probably would've died on the spot. The way Dmitri said it meant there were no barbs behind the words — he didn't really mean it, and yet I couldn't help but catch the irony; of all the people who had secrets to hide from someone who asked too many questions, it had to be me.

It occurred to me I've never been in this position before. For a split second, I almost sympathized with those people, who hide from justice to get away with their own illicit activities.

But only for a second. I, for one, hadn't actually broken any laws.

(Not lately, anyways).

"I just got the email an hour ago," he told me, heading towards one of the front row seats, which had been taken hostage by hundreds of purses, backpacks, and duffle bags. He pulled a phone out of a green one before heading back to me. "Telling I had been assigned a tutor? Amelia Fletcher, yes, that is you. I did not think I'd be meeting you so soon. Stark does not waste time, I suppose."
"No, he does not," I said, having just met the man and nearly left in the dust by a single conversation. "I didn't think it'd be so soon, either. But I guess better now than later. So, you need help with math and science, right?"

"Ha-ha," his laugh was ironic, tired as he ran a hand through his hair, making it stick up oddly. "Oh, yes. You may ask yourself, why does a dancer need to know math and science? But I need my general credits or whatever they are called, to stay here, yes? So, I have to pass this season, and I can stay." He made a face. "I am certain that sounds pathetic to you."

"What? No, it's fine," I let out a huff of amusement, unable to hide a smirk. "Actually, I'm kind of in the same situation as you."

"Really?" Dmitri looked surprised. He frowned, then a shout from the director made him flinch, and he threw me an apologetic smile. "Sorry, I have to go. Rehearsal is for another hour and a half. But I meet you afterwards, yes? There is a library nearby, we can meet there and discuss things further. Does that — does that sound okay?"

"Sounds great," I said with a smile, rocking back on my heels. It was nice to see Dmitri seemed just as nervous as I was. As he climbed back onto stage, I added, "Do you need my number? You can text me when you're done."

"Already have it," Dmitri waved his phone at me. To answer my unsaid question, he said, "Email, remember? But yes, I will let you know. Sorry for the wait. I know you must have better things to do."

You'd be surprised, I thought to myself wryly, as I said good-bye, giving one last wave before heading out the theater. It had been cloudy early, but the sky had cleared up since then, and a silver sun gave a vague sense of warmth upon the earth. The brisk air was a nice change from inside, and for a moment I just stood in the plaza, taking in a deep breath. That could've gone worse.

Then I looked around and wondered what the heck I was going to do until three-thirty.

Well, I was right on Broadway, and there was plenty to do around here. I caught the savory scent of a nearby deli and started heading towards the street, deciding I might as well get something to eat and think about what just happened.

I decided I liked Dmitri. Sure, the first impression wasn't great, but he seemed genuinely nice. And I couldn't help but think that if Michelle were here, she'd be making fun of the way I had been looking at him. There was no way I was going to tell her. Or Peter or Ned, for that matter. It'd be too weird.

As I stepped off the curb, I was secretly thankful Dmitri didn't go to our school.

I didn't see the bus until too late.

"Careful!"

Snap! I gasped as I was suddenly yanked backwards. The bus roared by, brakes screeching, rubber smoking. Its metal side slipped inches past my face as I was sent sprawling backwards onto the sidewalk.

Before my head could crack against the tarmac, a pair of arms caught me, breaking my fall.

I expected to see a face. Instead, two white lenses blinked through — were those welder's goggles? — from a red mask. He was already talking to me: "Hey, you need to watch your step next time, miss. I can't always be there to save you —"
With a startled cry, I seized and yanked myself out of his touch. The guy jumped back, holding out his hands in a sign of peace. "Whoa, easy! I was just helping you out!"

"What the —" I didn't recognize him at first. The red and blue suit, which looked like a pair of pajamas hung loosely off him, with the big spider symbol painted on his chest? Should've been a dead giveaway. But I was still reeling from almost getting hit by a bus that I just stared at him like an idiot. "Where did you come from?"

"Um," He pointed at the sky, as if that were some sort of obvious answer. He wore fingerless gloves, which revealed a strange wrist mechanism on either hand. His entire get-up looked homemade, amateur, nothing like the cool expert look the Avengers pulled off. It was definitely a lot less cool in person.

I opened my mouth to speak, still freaked out, but someone to the right called out, "Hey, look, it's Spider-Man!"

Spider-Man saluted the man who was pointing at him down the street. "Just doing my civic duty!" he said, and I noticed how strange his voice sounded. It was husky, deep, but it sounded forced. Like he was putting on an act. Why would he do that? Beneath it, he sounded a bit young to be called Man...

I squinted at the superhero in his ridiculous suit. Although shorter than me, he was quick and lithe, befitting that of a guy with superpowers, I suppose. But there was something about him. Something off —

Before I could think to ask, Spider-Man lifted his arm and flicked his fingers — thin rope shot out of his wrist and I stumbled back as he shot up into the air with a quick but powerful jump. I almost considered going after him, but Spider-Man was already swinging around the corner and out of sight.

My shoulders slumped and I fell against a nearby kiosk, hand against my head. One near-death experience was enough to make me slow down for real this time. Still, I couldn't shake this odd feeling I had. I checked my nose, but it wasn't bleeding. Yet I couldn't deny that I had gotten a really strange vibe.

Did I know Spider-Man?
Mia's Caller ID

After seeing the funny faces on Peter and Ned's phones from Homecoming, I had to do one too ;P

Chapter End Notes

Questions and Answers (from FF reviewers):

Ren (Guest) asked: how is this timeline lining up? Six months since she disappeared and it sounds like the Battle of New York was shortly after that but now we're past Homecoming? Or are you just making it fit together? Totally cool with however you're doing it, I'm just curious and want to make sure I didn't miss something.

Answer: You aren’t the first person to ask about how I’m changing the timeline for my fic, so here’s a basic rundown of the new timeline I’m using.

Iron Man: 2008
IM2: 2010

Avengers: May 2012

Mia in captivity: September 2010-October 2012

Peter becomes Spider-Man: May 2012

Sokovian Civil War Begins: November 1st, 2012

IM3: December 2012

Thor 2: November 2012 (I’m working on a new fic for Thor 2)

Captain America 2: Spring 2013

Avengers 2: December 2013/January 2014

Sokovian Civil War Ends: January 2014 (?)

Civil War: Spring/Summer 2014 (?)

Homecoming: Fall 2013/2014 (?)

Best I can simplify is by saying I’m shortening the time span between the movies that take place after the Avengers (2012), making the events occur sooner than they do “in real life”.

I’m still trying to keep the movies in the order they occurred in. Please let me know if I made any mistakes :x

Asexual Potato asked: Does Mia have a face claim or no?
Answer: Yes, she does! Mia’s face claim is an Australian model named Grace Quealy, a recommendation from a friend of mine and I’ve been stuck on her ever since.

Bittersweet256 asked: Plus do you happen to like white collar per chance?
Answer: Yes I do! I love White Collar, it’s one of my favorite shows of all time. I’m sad that it’s over now, but it had a healthy run and I’m glad it didn’t outlive its great writing (unlike some shows... *cough* Castle *cough*)

PondLake asked:
AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH
WHAT HAVE YOU DONE?
Answer: What I always do ;)

Also, before anyone asks, Dmitri is another OC. He’s going to play a semi-prominent role and maybe you can already guess where I’m taking his character, but the fic still remains as No Pairings and I’m not really focusing on anything other than Mia’s home adjustment and the IM3 plot.

I know there are way more questions than that, but these are the most recent ones I could find, and also the ones I can answer without spoiling anything. If you have any other questions, you can also hit me up on my tumblr blog, @rebelcolumbia. Anyways, hope you enjoyed!
Two hours later I was still stewing about the bus incident.

No one was hurt, and I wasn't dead, but the event left me shaken nonetheless. I kept thinking about Spider-Man and his oddly familiar voice, disguised by an act I couldn't decipher. At the very least, it kept my thoughts busy, and I wasn't as flustered when I met Dmitri again at the library.

It also helped that he was wearing less-form-fitting clothes now. Just jeans and a windbreaker — a little light for November here, but I wasn't one to be pointing that out. Especially since I wasn't too cold myself.

The library was right on the plaza, a separate building from both the class halls and the theaters. It provided a warm, comfortable, and oh so silent environment to study in. I hadn't realized how the busy streets were giving me a headache until I stepped inside the library, with its muted aisles of shelves and distant hum of heaters and fans.

Luckily the library was bigger than the school it was built for, so there were plenty of places to sit without being overheard. Dmitri was already familiar with the place, and led me towards the left, along rows of desks lit by old green lamps at regular intervals. I recognized some others here as being in the theater with Dmitri earlier, and there were other folks, older types who didn't seem attached to the school. No one paid us a second glance, which was a relief because my nerves were on fire again.

I tried to keep a damper on it as we went over Dmitri's work. But as we were parsing through quadratic formulas without a calculator, I must have had a funny look on my face, because Dmitri eventually looked up at me to ask, "Is there something wrong? You look...concerned. Did I make a mistake?"

"No, no, you're fine," I just shook my head, chin on my hand. Like an afterthought, I added, "I almost got hit by a bus earlier."

Dmitri stared at me. After a pause, he tilted his head uncertainly. "Are you...okay?"

"What? Yeah, I'm fine." I blinked, remembering how normal people had conversation and I needed
to be more specific. "Spider-Man, he, er, he pulled me out of the way just in time."

Dmitri's expression brightened, now that I gave him something to work with. "Oh, so he saved you?"

"Oh, yeah. I guess." That wasn't how I meant it. I didn't need to be saved...did I?

Dmitri watched me for a moment longer, maybe thinking I had more to say. But I didn't; I was too busy chewing on my lip and thinking about Spider-Man's voice. Where had I heard it before?

Perhaps sensing this conversation leading to a dead-end, Dmitri said, "Well, I like Spider-Man. I know I am new here and all, and maybe I don't understand, but it seems to me he is of good help, yes? New York is the only city I know that has its own superheroes protecting it. No place in Russia is like this, I can tell you."

"Hmm, not yet," I said, tapping my pencil to my notebook. While testing out my own answers to Dmitri's homework, I was multitasking with the material I had to study for my Freshman finals at the end of the month. Math and math seemed to go well together. "But I have a feeling we're only going to get more...special people out there. The Avengers can't be the only ones, if Spider-Man is any proof. After all, America can't hog all the heroes."

"It suits you. America always want to be saviors of the world," Dmitri said, before quickly backpedaling. "Er, no offense."

I cast him a look out of the corner of my eye, flashing a wry smirk. "None taken. So, how are those questions going?"

"Already it makes more sense when you explain it to me," Dmitri muttered, scratching down in his notebook. It had taken half a dozen tries and two pages full of notes, but eventually he managed to figure out the formula. "Although I am still partial to the calculator. Do you have something against technology, or do you just hate me?"

That actually made me laugh a little. Up to this point, I'd been winging it, not really knowing how actual, professional tutoring works — I figured just explaining what I knew to someone else my age wouldn't be any different if I was being paid for it than if it was in the classroom. Just yesterday I'd been helping Michelle with the Pythagorean theorem during class. At least Dmitri wanted to learn, and didn't doodle my face on every spare sheet of paper. It was nice to know I was doing a good job from his perspective.

"Because calculators are just there to check your answer, not give it to you," I said, pushing the graphing calculator out of his reach when he went for it again. Dmitri threw me a dirty look and I added, "I'm being serious! You can't use calculators as a crutch, you'll never learn to do it yourself. Besides, quadratic equations are easy to graph freehand, you just have to learn a few tricks. I can show you that, too."

Maybe I was being too hard on him, but it was just the way I grew up. During middle school I didn't have my own calculator and Uncle Ben refused to let us use one when Peter and I did homework in the kitchen. Uncle Ben was the kind of man who swore backwards and forwards on the ability to do math in your head. Sure, he didn't have a Master's degree in engineering, but he could still multiply 129 by 231 and get the right answer without even needing a sheet of paper. That's why Aunt May usually let him do the taxes. And sometimes Mom's, too.

Dmitri still looked doubtful, but he seemed to believe I wasn't doing this just to torture him. "Well, I hope so. This textbook is of no help at all. I have read it a thousand times and it still makes no sense."
With a somewhat derisive flick of his hand, he closed the book and pushed it away. I pulled it towards me, opening it back to the questions we still needed to answer. "I've never had an online class before but I'm going to take a wild guess and say it sucks?"

"You have no idea." Dmitri leaned back in his seat, running a hand over his face. I could see that doing all this math was starting to fatigue him. A long day of exercise probably didn't help, either. "Most of my classes are like that since coming here. It gives me more studio time to practice, but then I am left up all night doing this."

"An English textbook doesn't help," I commented, and made a face at the rather roundabout way the author had decided to describe solving the quadratic formula. Most of the questions had parenthesis, which changed up how to go at the formula, while the example we should be following had no parenthesis at all. There was no guide as to how to deal with it. Not to mention the book was published nearly two decades ago. "I'd hate to learn math in a different language."

"It doesn't matter how good at English I can get," Dmitri said, shaking his head. "I will always count numbers in my native tongue. If only our alphabets were the same...maybe I should have requested a translation."

I frowned to myself, looking over the book's instructions. It took me a few minutes to first read and translate in my head. Then I started to speak in Russian. "First identify the value of the coefficients, A, B, and C. Make sure that the equation is in the correct form: A-X-squared plus B-X plus C equals zero. When you have the values of A, B, and C, plug them into the quadratic formula..."

It was a little rusty. I hadn't spoken Russian since the Crucible, and since then it was either Sokovian or English with the twins. But when I looked up and was met with Dmitri's astonished look, I figured I wasn't so bad.

"You...what?" Dmitri blinked several times, a hand going over his face before he looked at me again, a bewildered grin pulling across his face. "You can speak Russian? And you never said anything before?"

I just shrugged my shoulders, fighting a blush rising to my face as I set down the textbook. "Sorry, kinda slipped my mind."

"But you speak so well!"

"Spent a year abroad," I said, which wasn't as much of a lie as it seemed. "Got a lot of first-hand experience."

"Abroad?" Dmitri tilted his head, and I wondered if I made a mistake, getting too specific. I felt a little embarrassed by this attention. "Where did you go?"

Of course, the first thing I thought of was Simmons' comment on the quinjet, so my immediate answer was, "St. Petersburg."

"No way! I'm from St. Petersburg." Dmitri looked absolutely delighted, while I just wanted to kick myself. If he asked me about the city, then he'd know I was lying for sure. Thankfully, though, he corrected himself before he could think of it: "Well, actually my father is from St. Petersburg. I was born here."

Now it was my turn to look shocked. "You're American? Seriously?"

Dmitri shrugged one shoulder. "My mother lives here. She is a journalist, I suppose you could say she's famous but...well, that's not important. She and my father divorced when I was only about a
year old, and he got, er, what do you call it in English? Опека?"

"Oh, custody?"

"Yes! Custody, that is the word. So, I was born here, but grew up in Russia," Dmitri continued, pleased to have the correct translation. "It makes travel interesting, to say the least."

"So, w-why did you come back here, then?"

"My father had bad business," Dmitri said, and the brightness in his expression faded a little. His eyes grew distant for a moment, and he frowned. "He is a banker, travels a lot. I attended dance school in St. Petersburg, but my father, he said it would be too difficult for him if I stayed. So now I live with my mother until things settle down again."

"Oh," I said, and I could tell there was some unspoken thoughts there. Either Dmitri didn't know what was going on either, or he did and didn't want to tell me. Not that I blamed him. Already this was treading on personal ground I wasn't ready to go through. "It's okay. New York's not St. Petersburg, but I think it's pretty great. Having two homes is better than one, right?"

"Oh, I suppose I can learn to love New York, warts and all," Dmitri smiled wistfully, casting me a teasing look. "It has its charms, certainly. And Little Odessa is nice, even if my mother doesn't like me going there. She says it is low-class. But what she doesn't know won't hurt her, yes?"

"Hey, she won't hear it from me," I said, holding up my hands in innocence. From the sound of it, Dmitri's mother sounded like a piece of work. I'd been to Brighton Beach, and honestly it wasn't that bad. Certainly, one of the nicer neighborhoods of Brooklyn, and it was the closest we'd ever get to summer ocean swimming. If she thought it was low-class, then Dmitri's mother must be pretty well off. Which honestly wouldn't be surprising, if she was famous and could afford to send Dmitri here. "All you rich folks with your secrets, I don't want any part of it."

"You joke, but it is annoying," Dmitri said, shaking his head in frustration. "Half the fun of this tutoring is that I don't have to go home so soon."

"And the other half is doing this without a calculator," I said, taking the calculator just as Dmitri was deftly reaching for it again. "Thought you were pretty slick, huh?"

"Cannot blame me for trying," Dmitri flashed me a grin.

✮✮✮

It was near twilight by the time we were finished, and I separated ways with Dmitri. Taking the train home was a nice, quiet ride to collect my thoughts, and leave me completely unprepared when I discovered both Peter and Ned waiting for me when I got back to Aunt May's. Honestly, I should have been expecting this.

I had completely forgotten about the text I sent Peter, so of course he was a little annoyed I left him hanging for hours on end. They were gathered in the kitchen, so I was stuck there, recounting my
day, including the interview with Tony Stark (sans Bruce Banner) and the weird first impression with Dmitri, then my latest near-death experience with the bus. I left out the part about the panic attack completely, deciding it not worth getting into right now.

"Wait, wait, wait, who cares about the guy? Tell me about Tony Stark!" Ned cut me off, waving his hands in the air. "And Spider-Man! He saved your life? How? Don't leave me hanging here!"

I kind of wished Aunt May was here to mediate all of this, but she was still at work. I was on my own to navigate this conversation. I could feel exhaustion starting to drag me down. I just wanted to take a nap.

Even so, I had to restrain myself from rolling my eyes. Leaning against the table I said, "I was just being stupid, okay? I walked onto the street and I didn't see the bus coming. Spider-Man, he — he pulled me out of the way. He said hi and then he swung off. That's it. That's all. End of story."

"And what happened with Tony Stark?" Peter asked, returning with a glass of milk. Ned scooched aside so we could all sit at the table together. "You texted me but didn't say anything. And then the bus thing happened? Are you okay?"

"I, um," I stammered, suddenly wishing we were talking about Spider-Man again. I didn't want to explain the panic attack to them, the mural or what I was thinking then. "I w-wasn't feeling so hot, and I missed the appointment. But then T-Tony Stark showed up and kind of did a speed-run interview. He was actually kind of nice, in a way."

It was hard to think of Tony Stark as nice after only a ten-minute conversation with him, but I didn't know how else to describe it. He had done me a huge favor, and for what? Just because he felt like it? Because it wasn't a big deal? He didn't even mention it as a favor, but I still felt like I kind of owed him one.

"That's awesome," Ned whispered, slurping his milkshake with wide eyes. "Did you ask for his autograph?"

"What? N-no, I didn't ask for his autograph," I said, making a face. As if I was in any state of mind to even think of it at the time. "He did call me Beanstalk, though, so there's that."

Peter snorted a little too hard at that, and I kicked him under the table. "Ow! Hey, come on, it's funny!"

"Yeah, I know, it's hilarious," I said sarcastically. "He mentioned you, Peter, by the way. He actually remembered we were cousins w-when I said I knew you. How well do you actually know him, anyways?"

"Oh, well, you know," Peter grinned sheepishly, giving me a half-hearted shrug and not quite looking me in the eye. "I spent the summer just being an intern, right? We talked a lot, I guess. He really helped after, well, after Uncle Ben, you know?"

"Oh," I said, my suspicion dying immediately. Of course, Peter would get attached to his personal hero. And after Uncle Ben died...well, I could only imagine what that must have been like for him. Maybe there was something about Tony Stark that made Peter feel better about what happened. "I guess I wasn't sure. Stark gets a lot of bad press. But he wasn't so bad in person, I think."

"Lucky," Ned groaned, throwing his head back. "You got to meet two superheroes in one day! The only superhero I met was Hawkeye, during the Incident — and all he has is a stupid bow and arrow. He doesn't even fly."
"What, uh, what was he like?" Peter said somewhat haltingly, scratching behind his ear. "Spider-Man, I mean?"

I took this as his attempt to change the conversation, and maybe not talk about Uncle Ben anymore. We still hadn't talked about what happened. I wasn't even sure where Peter had been at the time, only that Aunt May had been the last to find out. "Eh. He's shorter than I thought. His suit's kinda lame up close."

Ned laughed while Peter made a face.

"Well, it's not like he's a freaking Avenger," Peter said, sounding a little annoyed, then added under his breath, "No matter how hard he tries."

Then he cleared his throat, and a little louder, he said, "Not everyone's rich and famous or a god, you know. Some guy's just have to make do."

"Peter, Spider-Man's practically wearing pajamas."

"They're not pajamas!" He said so sharply that it actually made me jump a little. Peter blinked, unclenched his fists, before slumping back. "I mean, have you heard of the Devil of Hell's Kitchen? That guy doesn't even have a suit. I heard he just wears regular clothes and a black scarf over his head."

"Oh, yeah, so lame," Ned rolled his eyes, shaking his head in disapproval. "I heard he's a total wacko, too. Goes around beating people to a bloody pulp, like some sort of maniac. At least Spider-Man just webs them up for the police to get."

I knew about the Devil, another new arrival since I'd been gone. No one knew where he came from, either; although violent, the guy didn't seem to have any powers aside from kicking tons of ass. And unlike Spider-Man, he didn't seem to have a friendly, public persona, and only operated at night. In my opinion, a lot creepier than any hero I'd heard of, and I was secretly glad that I didn't live in Hell's Kitchen anymore, so I wouldn't have to deal with that.

"And you don't see the Devil saving people from buses, do you?" Peter threw me a significant look.

I threw one right back at him. "Okay, fine, just because Spider-Man looks stupid doesn't mean he's not a bad hero. And yeah, sure, maybe he saved my life. Not that he should get an award for acting like a basic human being or anything."

I was still unwilling to admit I ever needed saving, considering what I'd been through. Still, it was Ned who asked, "Still kind of cool, though. I've only seen videos of him, but is it true that his webshooters are mechanical? I have a bet with Michelle that they're organic, that they come from his body."

"What? Ew, no," Peter and I said almost simultaneously, shuddering at the revolting thought. At least we agreed on that. I continued with, "No, they were definitely mechanical. Some sort of trigger-action lever attached to tubes and canisters. I'm not sure, he was gone pretty fast. But they were probably the nicest part of his suit, really."

"Must be a smart guy," Peter remarked, trying to sound casual and failing. "To be able to just make one of those himself, right?"

"Unless he got someone else to make them for him," I pointed out, eyeing Peter and trying not to smirk. "You really like this guy Spider-Man, don't you?"
"Uh, what? No, I don't!" Peter retorted almost immediately, straightening as if caught off-guard. He glanced between me and Ned, pulling at his collar before glancing away. "I mean, I think what he does is great and all, but like, the guy himself? Total loser. Doesn't do anything cool like show up to parties or hang-out with famous people."

I frowned, a little confused by Peter's mixed signals here. Considering how hard he was arguing for Spider-Man, he was quick to deny even liking him. What was going on here? Wondering what he was playing at, I decided to give a little leeway and said, "Well, the rich and famous aren't everything. He might be a show-off but at least he's not going around signing autographs and kissing babies like Iron Man or Thor. He seems a bit more down-to-earth, I think. I kind of feel bad for not thanking him, actually."

Peter blinked, then smiled. "He's probably used to it, you know? Spider-Man's busy, he can't hang around."

What was Peter's deal? Before I could call him out, though, Ned gasped. "You didn't thank him?" Ned demanded, scandalized. "Mia, how could you!"

"Oh, come on, I was freaked out!" I protested, hunching up my shoulders helplessly. "Honestly, Spider-Man's lucky I didn't sock him in the face on accident. I don't like people jumping me from behind."

Peter rubbed the side of his face, frowning as if considering something unpleasant. Looking at me, his eyebrows raised uncertainly. "But you are okay, right?"

"I said yes, didn't I?"

"I-I mean, I know, but," Peter inhaled through his nose and I knew I had a big storm coming. "It's just that, Mr. Stark called me, and he told me you had some sort of panic attack? Right before your interview…"

At first, I didn't believe my ears. My blood went cold. The look on my face must have said enough because Peter's voice died out as soon as I turned my head to stare at him, aghast.

"Wait, what?" Ned frowned between the two of us. "Mia had a panic attack? Like a real one?"

But Peter had gone pale, pressing his lips together, only now realizing his mistake. I didn't look at Ned, just glared at Peter for a second longer. My voice was stiff when I answered, "It was real enough."

And with that I rose from my seat and stalked out of the room.

"Mia — shit — Mia, wait!" Peter called after me, and the sound of a scramble followed. A few seconds later he caught up with me at the bathroom door, snagging my arm. "Wait, please, I'm sorry —"

I whirled on him. "So, what are you, best buds with Tony Stark now? Does he always call you when someone has a dramatic breakdown at work?"

"What, no, no, that's not it at all!" Peter said, holding up his hands and frantically shaking his head. "I'm always sending him texts, you know, but he usually doesn't reply. B-but today! Today he just called me during Decathlon, just out of nowhere! I had to answer because, well, it's Tony Stark! He told me he met you. I guess he was just checking to see if you were telling the truth. Then he mentioned the panic attack thing and, I don't know, I got worried! And then you didn't say anything
Peter's explanation was turning into a nervous rambling mess, so I knew he was at least being sincere. That didn't make me any less angry, felt like a major invasion of privacy. I guess I didn't really blame Peter, he didn't know but I wished Tony Stark had more tact.

Oh, who was I kidding? It was Tony Stark.

"Wondering if maybe I was keeping it to myself? Maybe I didn't want Ned to know just yet?" I demanded, managing to keep my voice level, if somewhat tense.

As much as I loathed even thinking of the experience, I had planned on telling Peter...preferably him and Aunt May together, so I had some sort of buffer.

It wasn't that I didn't trust Ned or anything, but I'd never shared emotionally distraught situations with him, and starting with a panic attack seemed like a bad way to go. I'd probably have to tell him eventually, now that he knew, but I wasn't ready just yet.

I kept my voice hushed so Ned wouldn't overhear. "Did it ever occur to you that I'd tell you later?"

Peter's voice was tiny. "N-no... I just wanted to help —"

"Help? Help how?"

"I don't know! I just figured if I'd been there, I could've — I could've —" He struggled to come up with any retroactive solution to this.

"I don't need you to hold my hand, Pete," I cut him off. Maybe he didn't mean to sound condescending, but that's how it came off to me. Without thinking, I snapped, "I didn't need it in the Crucible, and I don't need it now for one stupid interview."

I only realized what I said when I was done.

"The Crucible?" Peter blinked, confused. "What's that?"

My back went ramrod; horrified with myself, I swallowed, but my throat was dry. My fingers started to twitch and I clenched them into fists, looking away. "Nothing. Forget about it."

"No, wait," Peter's voice raised with some manner of alarm, and he tried to stop me when I turned away again. "Mia, what're you talking about? What's the Crucible?"

I wrenched myself out of his grip, stumbling — Peter was stronger than I anticipated, even with my own strength. "I-I said, just forget about it!"

And with that, I stormed into my room and slammed the door.

Now alone, I slumped against the door, letting my head fall back with a sigh. I didn't want to start an argument about Spider-Man. Really, I didn't have a problem with him, aside from my own personal questions. I didn't know how to explain to Peter or Ned that it felt like I knew him somehow. Spider-Man had shown up longer after I'd been taken. I wasn't even aware of him until after I got back. What did I really know?

But that was it, wasn't it? I knew what it was like to be chased, to be in danger. A lot of my own choices, my own actions, had led to disaster. The absolute last thing I wanted would to turn myself into some sort of hero and pretend I had any idea of what I was doing. It was different with the
Crucible, when I went after the twins to save them — in the end, I didn't really have a choice. That was me fixing a mistake, not trying to save the day. I definitely wouldn't do it again unless I absolutely had to.

I kept my old backpack tucked under my bed, hidden and easily reached. From it, I pulled out the polaroids I had taken in France. Of me, Wanda, and Pietro. The stupid selfies and the three of us standing in front of the fountain in Nice. Right now, I wished they were here with me. At least with them, I didn't have to explain myself. They questioned everything, trusted nothing. In a strange way, life made sense when I was around them.

Now? Not so much.

A part of me wondered what they would think, if they knew I'd met Tony Stark today. They certainly wouldn't be excited, not in the way that Peter and Ned were. Hell, I'd imagine they'd be disappointed, that I didn't try to get revenge for him.

But I wasn't interested in revenge. Subconsciously, I never made the connection of that cool businessman on the balcony to be the same guy that dropped bombs on Sokovia. Maybe once, years ago, but now? I believed it when Tony Stark first said he was a changed man, that he was Iron Man, that he was no longer making weapons. Maybe he was a hypocrite — Iron Man was one hell of a tool, that's for sure. But he was the only one that used it. There were would be no other Iron Men. Any actions he took, he was responsible for.

I respected that. I wasn't sure if the twins would. There was a lot of bad blood. I didn't think they'd ever forgive him.

But they wouldn't think I was weird for being suspicious of Spider-Man.

Maybe I should have brought them here. Maybe they could help make sense of this world I didn't understand anymore.

"Are those your friends?"

I jumped, looked up from my bed to see Peter leaning against the doorframe, his shoulders hunched and hands in his pockets. He nodded at the photographs, which lied open in my lap. "Were they — were they with you, you know...over there?"

"Oh," I covered them with my hands, annoyed at myself at having missed hearing him open the door. There I was again, lost in another reverie. "Yeah."

I didn't say any more than that, just looked down and shuffled the photos together.

A look crossed over Peter's face. I couldn't decipher it and I didn't want to ask. Was he still thinking about the Spider-Man conversation? It had gotten more intense than I expected, and I hoped he wouldn't bring it up again. I just wanted to let it lie. I was trying to focus on the good memories and not dwell too long on the bad.

After a moment, he shifted away from the door and stepped inside. When I didn't say anything to stop him, Peter came to sit down next to me, the mattress squeaking a little beneath him. My first reaction was the flip over the photos so he couldn't see them — then, after a second thought, I slowly reversed my hands, and allowed them to face up again.

I think I surprised both of us when I actually offered one to him. Peter took it after a moment, peering at the photo Agent Coulson took, disguised as a tourist. "Who are they? They look older than you."
I hesitated before I answered that, wondering if it was a betrayal to reveal who they were. But this was Peter, and I trusted him above everyone else. "Wanda and Pietro. They're t-twins. I actually don't know how old they are. I never thought to ask. They, um, they were there with me, when I escaped."

"From the Crucible?" Peter asked. Just hearing that name again made the hairs on the made of my neck stand on end, and when I shot him a look, Peter gave a small, apologetic shrug. "That's where you were, wasn't it? The Crucible. Whatever it is."

"Whatever it is," I agreed, deciding not to tell Peter any more than that. He didn't need to know what happened, certainly not what they did to me, only that it had been a place, that it was real. Taking a deep breath through my nose, I said, "Actually, I probably wouldn't have gotten out alive if it weren't for Wanda and Pietro. We made it all the way to England before they decided...they decided they wanted to go back."

"Back where?"

Another pause. "Sokovia."

Peter gaped, astonished. "No way. Sokovia?"

"Where they're from. Where they were k-kidnapped." And where I'd been taken, but I left that part out. "Maybe they would've come with me here, but they were worried about the civil war that just broke out. And I-I guess they wanted to find their family again. What was left of it."

"Oh," Peter nodded, and I was glad there were no pressing questions to that. "What happened to them?"

"They're okay." I said, my voice quiet. Peter threw me a confused look, so I went on, "At least, I think so. I don't know. Sokovia isn't exactly safe. I haven't heard anything from them since we last said good-bye."

"They're probably all right," Peter said, handing me back the photo. "I mean, if you managed to get through Europe together on your own, then Sokovia can't be that bad, right?"

I chuckled. "I don't know, maybe. But yeah, I think you're right. They're tough. Tougher than me, that's for sure."

I sighed, and a long pause fell over between us. Peter's hands fiddled uselessly in his lap, looking for something to do. So, I handed him another photograph, without a word. It was my photo, the one where I was all beat-up, but smiling, holding up a peace sign. It looked so stupid to me now, but I decided not to say so when it made Peter smile. "You look like shit, Goose."

"I felt like shit," I said with an approving nod. "That was just after we got away for the first time."

The soft light from the window behind us glanced softly off the shiny photo. Peter played with it a little, thumb running over the date I'd written at the bottom. "This was a week before you got home."

I nodded, not really knowing what to add to that. My time in Europe was largely a blur now, with bright spots of clarity interspersed. I remembered the scary moments, the fast moments, every time I had to think on my feet. The moments that were quiet, that were calm, seemed to fade into the background. I guess the length of time would've felt a lot different to Peter, who only had his regular life, the routine of school to think about.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Peter asked eventually, and when I frowned, he continued, "I mean,
to the FBI. You never mentioned Wanda or Pietro. You said you were all alone. Why?"

It took me a moment to find the right answer. "A lot happened, Maverick. There were things we did that I normally wouldn't do. And they'd already been through enough. I didn't want them to get in trouble. We were just trying to survive."

"Do you miss them? Wanda and Pietro?" Peter asked, and there was a strange note in his voice. Concern? Jealousy?

"Every day," I said, but then cast him a smile. "But I had to get back here, no matter what. They're my friends, but they're not you, or Ned, or Aunt May. Home meant something different to them. There wasn't anything wrong with that."

That must have been the right thing to say, because Peter smiled back and nudged me with his elbow. "Aww, look at you, being all mushy. And you didn't spontaneously combust!" He laughed when I cuffed him across the head. "Hey, you think they'd like me? I mean, if they think you're cool, then they'd think I'd be awesome."

"Oh, is that so?" I said, mocking offense. "Well, I told them about you, if it makes you feel any better. Wanda thought it was funny that you and Pietro have similar names. I don't know how you both managed to be so annoying, though."

"Ugh, you're so mean, you know that?" Peter huffed, blowing hair out of his eyes and scrunching up his nose. He looked back down at the photo, opening his mouth to say something, then paused. Then he tapped the sign in the background of my selfie. "Wait, you took this in Nice?"

"I — what?" I wasn't expecting the question, and leaned over to check. I hadn't been paying attention to what was behind me when I had taken the picture. But indeed, above my head was a hanging sign, with the French name of the bakery we had dumpster dived behind — Boulangerie de la Nice. My eyes fought with the difficult French sounds in my head; even harder than it was in English. "Oh, y-yeah. That's where our train led us."

But Peter didn't say anything. His eyes drew back down to the date at the bottom of the photograph. "This was three days before the terror attack in Nice. When the Ten Rings blew up that boat." he looked up at me, eyes wide. "You were there when it happened?"

I froze, mouth agape. I had completely forgotten about the HMS Adelaide. That I had taken photographs right before it exploded. Photographs lying less than four feet beneath us, still in my backpack. They were like a beacon in my head, bright and blaring, demanding attention.

"Mia?" Peter asked, when I didn't speak for several long seconds.

The explosion was still clear in my head, the piercing noise, the invisible force that had knocked me off my feet. I had to pull myself back to the present, to remind myself I was sitting on my bed, that I wasn't back in France, running from the Komitet.

"N-no," I lied, and it was bitter on my tongue. I looked away, put my hands over the photos still in my lap, tried to keep my hands from trembling. "We'd l-left just the day before. We d-didn't hear about it until we saw the-the news in Paris. We were…. we got lucky, I guess."

"Damn," Peter just shook his head, astounded. "I remember watching it on TV. I can't imagine being so close to it. Were you scared?"

"I was scared of a lot of things, exploding boats notwithstanding," I admitted, chuckling nervously. "We were paranoid. It was hard not to think anything bad happening wasn't somehow our fault."
"Well, at least you know this one wasn't," Peter said, handing me back the polaroid. "Just a small world, I guess. Hey, me and Ned are heading down to get some shawarma later, wanna come?"

And that was that. I was almost disappointed that the topic ended so soon, because my own curiosity hadn't died. But I knew I should be relieved, because Peter was no longer suspicious. I wasn't even entirely sure why I lied. It just felt too risky, too personal. There was still so much I hadn't told Peter, and if I had revealed to him I was there, if I showed him the pictures I still couldn't look at, then I'd have to relive so much more. I wasn't ready for that. I still hadn't figured out what it all meant.

Although Peter was satisfied, I was not. In fact, it just raised old questions I'd forgotten. Maybe Peter was right, that we had nothing to do with the attack. But it didn't feel right — maybe I was still paranoid. I was the only one (aside from Wanda and Pietro) who knew that the Extremis soldiers were responsible for the destruction of the HMS Adelaide. That the Crucible had been more or less in charge of them in that time, until SHIELD raided the compound. Until that day in Paris, when I watched the news, I had no idea the Ten Rings had anything to do with it.

So, what was the connection? What tied Extremis to the Ten Rings?

Character progression sheet.. It's not done yet, but this is what i've done so far xP
mostly I just wanted to record how much damage she takes lol
also Mia when she was small

art by me :)

Ch. 1-7
Chapter Forty

Hey guys, just letting you know, I edited the last scene of the previous chapter, and the chapter before that. The argument is different, and I’m changing Spider-Man to his homemade/pajama suit — Peter doesn’t get his nice, official Spider-Man suit made by Tony until later (TBD). So he doesn’t have anything fancy right now and is still largely just learning about how to be a superhero (in case it wasn’t obvious).

JSYK this fic takes place a while before Homecoming.

Chapter Forty

✮

I woke up in a cold sweat.

Gasping, I shot up, grasping at my chest. My heart pounded a frantic pace, and my throat was raw and ragged. Every breath felt like I was sucking in knives. There was a strange metallic taste in my mouth. My nerves were on fire and I was ready to fight or run or do whatever it took to survive whatever menace had found me.

But I was just in my bedroom. Faint light flickered from the curtained window, and as my heart evened out, my eyes adjusted to the darkness. Everything was where it was supposed to be.

The alarm clock's green numbers glowed softly at me. 3:14 AM.

Fantastic.

With a groan, I pulled myself out of bed. Even though I'd gone to sleep early, I felt exhausted and sore. My mind was caught in a fog, and I need to drink something.

As soon as I left the warm comfort of my blankets, the chilly room started to leech away at my body heat. I shivered, shuffling over to the door. Stepping out into the hallway, my focus was only on getting water, until I heard a door close.

My head perked up, in the direction of Peter's room. It was too dark to tell, but I swore I saw his door shut. Was Peter still up?

I peered into the dark, pausing for a moment, waiting to hear something else. But the apartment was quiet. The only sound I heard was the hum of the pipes from the kitchen.

Shaking my head to myself, I shifted back into motion, and slipped into the bathroom.

Flicking the switch, I flinched and ducked my head against the too-bright light. Squinting through the
pain, I leaned against the sink. The cool porcelain was soothing against my hands, still clammy with sweat. I took several long, deep breaths, fighting against the invisible weight pushing down on my back. It felt like it would crush me, suffocate me if I didn't breathe hard enough. It felt like I was choking on air.

Eventually, I recovered enough to remember why I came in here in the first place. I reached for the glass on the counter, hands trembling as I placed it under the faucet. I watched it fill slowly. If I just let go, if my fingers slipped, the cup would fall, shatter into useless, sparkling pieces down the sink…

The water was relieving down my throat. For a moment, I forgot about the vice around my chest and I could breathe normally again.

A pair of sad gray eyes met mine in the mirror. I frowned at my reflection, before looking away. I only needed to see the shadows on my face, that red scar to know I wasn't ready to deal with myself right now.

With a clink, I set the cup down and resigned myself back to my bedroom.

When I stepped out of the bathroom, I heard a door close again. My eyes shot straight to Peter's door. I could barely see anything now, half-blinded by the bathroom light I'd just turned off — And I couldn't tell if I saw movement or not.

I ran a hand over my face. Was Peter spying on me? Because he wasn't being very subtle about it. I was actually considering confronting him, despite the time and how tired I was. But I had to know. What's going on?

Approaching Peter's door, I raised my hand, then hesitated, still uncertain. For a second, I thought I could hear movement on the other side. The rustle of cloth, the soft thumping of tiptoeing footsteps…

Behind me, the floor creaked.

"Mia?"

I spun around, swallowing a gasp before I disturbed the silence. My heart skipped a beat when I saw the ghostly white robe, the silhouette of a woman reaching out for me. I stumbled back, utterly horrified, my shoulder hitting the doorframe with a solid thunk.

"Mia! It's okay, it's just me," Aunt May said in a hush, and it took me a second longer than I was willing to admit to recognize her. "Hey, hey, are you all right? I'm sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

I went absolutely rigid when her hands landed on my shoulders. It wasn't until I registered her soft touch, that I forced myself to relax, to tell my instincts that she wasn't a threat.

My breath came out in a shuddering whoosh. "Oh. I-I'm fine. I'm okay."

It was fairly obvious the opposite was true, so I wasn't surprised when Aunt May asked, "What are you doing up? Is something wrong?"

I couldn't see her face, but I could hear her concern well enough. I straightened a little, wrapping my arms around myself. "Nothing. Just thirsty."

"Another nightmare?"

I blinked, surprised. "What? H-how did you —?"
That's when it hit me. I woke her up.

And I knew, without asking, that this couldn't be the first time. "Oh no. I-I'm sorry, I didn't mean —"

"No, no, it's fine, sweetheart," May hummed, her hand pushing hair out of my face. Her hands were a little calloused, but they were warm, and even though I flinched, I didn't pull away as she drew closer. "It's not your fault. It happens to everyone. But I heard you crying out, Mia. Are you sure you're okay?"

I'd been crying out in my sleep? Well, that explained the sore throat. "I-I don't...I've just been having b-bad dreams."

"Of what?"

I didn't want to tell her, because "bad dreams" was majorly underselling it. I swallowed, already feeling thirsty again. And we were just standing together in the darkness, just talking to each other even though I couldn't see her and I knew she couldn't see me. It was weird, but I liked the solidness of the cold wood beneath my bare feet. I much preferred it over the false sense of safety my bed would provide.

"I was trapped," I started slowly, my voice so quiet that Aunt May had to draw even closer just to hear. In the morning, I'd find bruises on my arms where my fingers had gripped too hard. "When the building collapsed. I was in Hell's Kitchen, I was — I was home. I was in Hell's Kitchen, I was — I was home. D-during the Incident. I know I wasn't really there when it happened but it...it felt so real. I couldn't see anything. There was just so much smoke. And I could hear people calling out. But I-I can't move, there's something on top of my back, and I can't get it off.

Aunt May remained entirely silent, listening intently, but her hands on my shoulders tensed when I continued in a hoarse voice. "A-and then I hear Mom. I can hear her — I can hear her screaming a-and crying and I know she's hurt and she sounds so close. I can't see her but I can reach her, I can get to her but I can't move, there's too much debris. I'm stuck. I want her to hear me but I can't speak. I don't have a voice. She doesn't know where I am but she's calling my name and I know she's hurt. She's hurt so bad but I just. Can't. Do anything!"

My voice broke on the last word and the dam of tears broke.

"Oh, shhh, shh," May took me in a great hug, and I slumped over her as I started to cry, and cry hard. She rubbed my back, cooing softly, "You're okay, Mia, it was just bad dream. That's all. Just a bad dream."

"It felt real," I whispered between sobs, trying and failing to calm myself down. I buried my face in her shoulder, chest shuddering. "It never ended. She never stopped screaming, it just kept going and going, and I wanted it to stop and I hated it, I hated it so much —"

"Well, it's over now, okay?" Aunt May gently interrupted before I could get any further than that. "It never happened. It'll never happen, do you understand? You're home, and you're safe."

I didn't feel safe at all, but hearing those words helped a little bit. I wasn't really in the state to argue, so I just nodded mutely. I cried myself out on Aunt May's shoulder, and she took it without complaint, just continued to murmur soft assurances.

I missed Mom. I missed her so much it hurt.

But I didn't know where I'd be right now if it weren't for Aunt May.
When my tears finally subsided, Aunt May pulled back a little, holding me at arm's length. "A little better now? Good. Maybe you should stay home, tomorrow, okay?"

"B-but I have class —

"Even you can afford a sick day or two," Aunt May said. "It's just one day, okay? You've had a rough weekend, I think, after that interview. There's nothing wrong with taking a small break."

As much as I didn't want to agree, a wave of relief washed over me and I slumped, allowing her to usher me back to my room.

By the time I could think of apologizing for waking her up, knowing Aunt May would still go to work in the morning, she'd already closed my door. Once again, I was alone in my room, a place that still didn't feel quite like my own.

My possessions were far and few between. Although I managed to personalize my room with some books and knick-knacks, much of it was still bare, still had the fixtures of a room meant for transient guests. The plain bureau, the half-empty closet, no photos or posters on the wall. Sometimes it felt like I wasn't meant to be here, that I wasn't meant to stay.

Feeling like a stranger in my own bedroom wasn't the best thing for me right now.

Although Aunt May had put me to bed, I slipped out again, turning on my lamplight. My face still felt puffy and warm from the crying, but I actually did feel a little better now. Still exhausted, but not as emotionally wound-up.

I sat on the floor, knowing if I fell asleep I'd have the same dream again. I kept the lamp on so I'd feel a little less alone. I knew I was going to be in a miserable condition in the morning. But for now, I reached for the photos under my bed, in an effort to distract myself.

I still had that TIME magazine and yellow rain jacket, although the latter was so torn and tattered it was barely functional anymore. The striped scarf had bloodstains on it — having come so far from Sokovia, it was remarkable any of this was still in one piece.

Wanda and Pietro's faces stared back at me. In most of the photos, they didn't smile — maybe it was a cultural thing, or maybe they just didn't feel like they had much to smile about.

It occurred to me that I never had nightmares when I had been trying to get back home. Granted, I didn't get a lot of sleep to begin with, but this felt different somehow.

Flipping to the photo where Pietro had accidentally snapped a picture of himself, I knew it wasn't completely true. There had been multiple nights on the train to Sokovia when I'd been woken by Pietro, restless even in his dreams. He never talked about it, what he saw in his sleep, and for the most part, I knew better than to ask. Maybe Pietro hadn't been aware of it, but he'd cry out in his sleep. For his mother, for his father, for Wanda.

I didn't know what to do at the time. It was just easier to pretend it didn't happen.

I figured it was from the years Pietro spent in the Crucible, the greater torment he experienced. That those nightmares were just a byproduct of that extended time that I never had.

I never thought I'd be afflicted with the same thing.

Now? I wished I had said something. If not to him, then to Wanda. If I had any idea how bad it was, I wouldn't have let Pietro suffer alone.
But now it was too late for that. Hindsight was always 20/20, wasn't it?

There was nothing I could do to shake my regret. But before my mood could get any worse, I flipped to one of the last photos, at the bottom of the stack, and paused.

The *HMS Adelaide*.

The Extremis soldier, Johannson.

And Aldrich Killian.

That white suit, that friendly smile. Shaking hands with a terrorist.

Just last evening I'd lied to Peter about Nice, but I hadn't pulled out these extra photos. The last one I took had been the a split second before the explosion — I had captured the initial shock wave; the glass in all the ship's windows breaking, glittering clouds hovering in midair, a strange halo. Seeing Johannson, being hit by that shockwave, had put me into a waking trance I still couldn't remember. Looking at these photos now, I was reminded of something I wanted to avoid in the first place.

But now my earlier curiosity had been sustained — only to be replaced with more questions.

What was Killian doing on the *Adelaide*? How did he know Johannson? Did Killian have any idea how dangerous the man was? Why was the *Adelaide* the target? What happened to Killian afterwards? As far as I knew, he escaped the disaster alive.

But he had never shown up on the news around the event, which was a little odd. If media stations knew a guy as rich and famous as him had been a witness, they'd swarm him like a pack of starving piranhas. And yet, Killian slipped away unnoticed. Did anyone even know he had been there?

Even more importantly: Was Killian what connected Extremis to the Ten Rings? I had proof he at least had contact with the former, but I had no idea what he had to do with the latter. The Ten Rings was a terrorist organization that originated in East Asia and had spread westward. Killian was white bread American. I couldn't imagine how he'd be associated with them.

A creeping feeling went up my back as I continued to examine his picture. I didn't realize at the time of taking it, but I was beginning to think I may have stumbled onto something dangerous.

And I had no idea what to do about it.

✮✮✮

"So, I heard you had a panic attack," Michelle asked on Tuesday, during Study Hall. "Is that why you weren't at school yesterday?"

She was remarkably casual about it, although I wasn't sure she had any other settings besides 'droll, deadpan'. Still, I shot her an annoyed look from my computer screen. "Where did you hear that?"

"That loser told me."

It took me a second to translate. "Peter?"

"No, the other one."
"Oh, Ned," I nodded, then rolled my eyes. "I'm never going to live this down, am I? Does anyone else know?"

Michelle shrugged, making a face as she leaned against the desk. For the past half-hour she'd been reading *The Communist Manifesto*; if she was actually reading it out of personal interest, or was just hoping the title would make the supervising teacher a little nervous, I couldn't be sure. "I don't think so, but who cares, right? Nothing's going to stop you coming back from the dead."

"I wasn't dead, I was just — oh, never mind," I shook my head, turning back to my screen with a scowl. In Mrs. Boyle's study hall, all the computers were lined up against the walls. I chose a desktop perpendicular to Mrs. Boyle's desk so she couldn't spy what I was doing on my browser.

Michelle, however, could see exactly what I was doing. Leaning in, she asked, "Why are you looking up Aldrich Killian?"

"No reason," I said, a half-hearted attempt at a lie. I raised my hand as if to cover the screen, then brought it back down again. The last thing I needed was to look suspicious right now. "Just looking at what he's up to. For a report in my Business class."

"Right," Michelle pursed her lips, eyeing me for a second. It seemed she didn't believe me for a long moment, but then she just flopped back in her seat, picking up the *Manifesto* and returned to reading. "Whatever, then. Have fun with that."

I inhaled, then sighed in relief. The last thing I needed was getting shit about this. I was still dealing with my breakdown last weekend. Aunt May had been tiptoeing around me for the past couple days, treating me kindly but with delicacy. Peter, on the other hand, didn't seem to be aware of what happened, and he'd greeted me Monday morning with an oblivious smile — but hadn't looked surprised when I had said I was staying home. Maybe he really had been awake last night. The very thought made me tense. How much had he heard? What had he thought? Honestly, what happened, I desperately hoped he wouldn't tell anyone else. So far, he seemed good at keeping secrets.

Maybe Michelle didn't believe me, but for once I appreciated her cold indifference to the world. I didn't think I was going to get anything more out of her.

That is, until she said, "You're not going to find out online that his only clientele is the U.S. Government."

I paused after just clicking a link to a news article. I turned my head to frown at Michelle, who flicked a page in her book and kept reading. "What? What're you talking about?"

"Killian's company, A.I.M.? Advanced Idea Mechanics?" Michelle glanced up at me, raising one skeptical eyebrow. "Everyone knows it's a Research and Development agency, but the company's locked up tighter than Fort Knox. They don't disclose who they work for."

"Then how do you know?"

Michelle shrugged. "I read the Declassified files from the Pentagon for fun."

That actually didn't surprise me one bit. "I guess someone had to fill in the gaps after Stark backed out of the weapons industry."

She nodded sagely. "AIM's been doing business with Big Brother for the past four years or so. I think their big break was with, like, pyrotechnics or something. Explosives, bombs, that sort of thing. It's not an Iron Man suit, but it still makes stuff go boom."
"Explosives," I repeated under my breath, going back to the article I pulled up. It was the *HMS Adelaide* — I was reviewing the public details of the case. It was still unsolved who exactly was involved, although French police had ruled it as a suicide bomber.

Just yesterday, I had photocopied all my pictures and saved them on a flash drive, which I tucked under my mattress. Maybe I was being paranoid, but if what I saw in Nice was as bad as I thought, then keeping copies of everything was just to be safe. I had to make sure of this. Killian shook hands with Johansson, who was undoubtedly the suicide bomber the police had identified. His picture was even in the paper, although no one had a name for him yet.

Could it be a coincidence?

After a long pause, I asked aloud, "Would Killian have anything to gain from a Ten Rings terrorist attack?"

"What?" Michelle was so startled she laughed. Her shoes slapped the linoleum as she shifted forward in her seat, drew closer to me.

"I mean, would he?" I repeated, throwing her a doubtful look. "What's that thing they say in cop shows? Follow the money? That's the same thing here, isn't it?"

We kept our voices hushed so we wouldn't be overheard, but I could see Michelle's smile starting to twitch uncertainly. "Mia, what're you talking about? This isn't some stupid cop show, it's real life."

"Yeah, I know," I said, aggrieved by the reminder. I wasn't stupid. I was there. Of all people, I was the most aware of what this all meant. I gestured to the screen. "Why would they blow up the *Adelaide*? It's not a passenger ship, it's for cargo. Terrorists blow up airliners and subways and other soft targets because that's where a lot of regular civilians travel through, it scares the most people. Cargo ships don't hold people. They hold supplies."

Michelle stared at me silently as I thought aloud. Running a hand through my hair, I went on: "The *Adelaide* was coming in from Australia. A.I.M. has a public base there in Melbourne, maybe Killian was shipping something in from there..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, slow down, Nancy Drew," Michelle sat up, scrunching her nose and holding up her hands. "What does Aldrich Killian have to do with that ship? He wasn't even there when it happened. What are you trying to do, pin the blame on him? Expose him to the world? Turn into the next Nellie Bly?"

I opened my mouth, then closed it. I couldn't tell her about the photos. I couldn't tell her how it all came to happen. It already looked bad, and I couldn't think of how to convince Michelle without pulling out the proof.

"Who cares?" she asked, throwing out a hand. "Who gives a shit about Aldrich Killian? He's just another rich guy selling weapons so the President can blow people up on the other side of the world. I'm not saying the government are stand-up guys or anything, but would they really work with the same dude who might be working with the bad guys?"

I hadn't thought of that, and I was about to reply when Michelle added, "What's this really about, Mia? Are you just looking for a distraction? Because I can think up of a few less crazy conspiracy theories for you to look into, if you want."

I threw her a disgruntled look. "No, I'm fine, thanks. I just think it's weird, that's all. The Ten Rings just seem to choose interesting targets, that's all."
Michelle didn't immediately reply; did she think I had a point? Her gaze slid across the desks, to the other side of the room, as she chewed her lip thoughtfully. "Maybe you're right. But what can you do about it? It's not like we have the Avengers on speed-dial to tell them that the Ten Rings is up to something fishy. Oh, the crazy bad guys have a secret, take-over-the-world plot? They probably know that already. To be honest, I don't think you're the first person to figure this out, Mia. They're probably already taking care of it."

I didn't know why, but that answer disappointed me. Not Michelle's doubt, but rather the reasonable answer. I mean, what was I thinking, that I'd stumbled upon some major conspiracy that no one knew about? The CIA, the Pentagon, the Avengers had everything and more at their disposal — if they were planning on taking down the Ten Rings, they would've certainly tracked down every lead they could think of, including this one.

I wasn't special. I wasn't crazy. I was just some girl with too much time on her hands, with too much to think about.

Maybe Michelle was right. Maybe I was trying to avoid something.

"Yeah," I muttered, resting my hand on the mouse and closing the browser. "I guess you're right."

"I'm not trying to be an asshole," Michelle said, and she gave me an apologetic smile — unusually sincere for her. "Okay, maybe a little bit. But don't you have those Freshman tests this weekend?"

I winced at the thought. I'd completely forgotten. Up until today, I'd been using Study Hall to, well, study. "Oh, dammit."

"Yeah, that's what I thought," Michelle smirked, kicking her feet onto the desk. "How about you save your grades first, before you go trying to save the world?"
S.H.I.E.L.D. DOSSIER

FLETCHER, AMELIA ELEANOR

TITLE: Avenger
HANDLE: Rebel Columbia
STATUS: Active
CLEARANCE: Level 4

DOB: February 14
AGE: 18 y/o [CONTESTED]
NATIONALITY: American

SEX: Female
EYE/HAIR COLOR: Gray, Blonde
HEIGHT/WEIGHT: 5.10ft, 125lbs

KNOWN RELATIVES:
- Hedy Fletcher [Mother/Deceased]
- May Parker [Aunt/Alive]
- Peter Parker [Cousin/Alive]

ABILITIES:
- Superhuman Strength, Speed, Reflexes, Metabolism
- Enhanced Senses
- Low Healing Factor
- Impervious to Extreme Temps
- Natural Leader and Tactician

SKILLS:
- Advanced Coder, Computer Hacking
- Superior Marksmanship
- Expert Martial-Artist
- Master Survivalist
- Fluent in English, French, Spanish, Sokovian, Russian

TEMPERAMENT:
- Reserved
- Patriotic
- Compassionate
- Loyal
- Independent
- Insubordinate [†]

NOTES:
- Has speech impediment, stutters
- Known to lie about age
- CONFIRMED Super Soldier
- Possibly Child of Cpt. Steve Rogers [CONTESTED]
It's kind of set to a time after this fic (she's not an Avenger yet so...), so I wanted to wait to post this one b/c it had spoilers lol

Chapter End Notes

In other news, I posted a new MCU fic called What Remains of the Light. Its set to Thor: The Dark World and features a new OC, so check it out if you're interested! I’m not sure yet if both fics are set in the same continuity yet, but we’ll see :)
Another short chapter. Its starting to address one of the only (and the biggest) gripes I had about Homecoming: why Peter never talked about Uncle Ben.

Having been convinced I was just chasing wild conspiracy theories regarding Aldrich Killian and the Ten Rings, I settled myself with just living and appreciating a peaceful life.

That lasted for about a solid day before it all came crumbling apart.

I'd been at home, studying for those Freshman Finals that same Tuesday. With four days to go, that's where most of my focus had been. Deciding to make camp in the living room, I took the couch, floor, and coffee table hostage as I spread out all my work. Mostly textbooks and the various notes the teachers had given me on their material last year.

It was getting exhausting. Not because the material was difficult, but after spending six hours in school, spending another six on old homework was really starting to drain my mental energy. Maybe that was why I didn't complain when Peter decided to flop down on the couch behind me and started to talk.

"How's it going, Goose?" he asked, and I could smell the fried chicken he just pulled out of the microwave. It was going to be leftover meals tonight, since Aunt May burned the meatloaf again and wasn't in the mood for second chances.

"Considering the sweet release of death, as usual," I said, picking my head up and running a hand through my hair. It probably looked like a bird's nest now.

"That bad, huh?" Peter laughed, and when he caught me eyeing his chicken, he brought up an arm to guard his plate. "No! Mine! Hey, look, I brought something to distract you."

I wasn't sure if he meant from his dinner or from my homework, but when Peter pulled out a sheet of paper, I took it nonetheless. It was decent cardstock, felt very official, and when I saw what was printed on the other side, I understood.

A death certificate.

Specifically, my death certificate.

Seeing my name printed along with the signatures of the M.E. and other people I didn't know were in charge of making sure I was dead was a little startling, to say the least. I hadn't even considered that we'd have this until just now.
"Whoa, this is so creepy," I said and Peter nodded in agreement. I squinted, holding the paper up to the light. "I should hang it on my wall."

"What?" Peter snorted, almost scandalized as he laughed into his drink. "Why?"

"For posterity," I said with a smile. "Next time someone asks me my proudest achievement, I'm gonna point at this."

"You don't think it's a little morbid?" Peter raised an eyebrow, setting down the glass. "You know, after everything's that happened?"

"It doesn't remind me of what happened." I said, putting the paper down, still looking at it. It was an honest answer, maybe a little too honest. Honestly, this didn't remind me of what happened in Europe so much as it did remind me of Mom. For a second, the words were a little hard to find. Then I smirked and added, "You don't happen to have an autopsy report, too, do you?"

For that, I got a chicken wing at my head. I caught it just as Peter said, "Oh, you're so funny."

"I am. Where did you find this, anyways?"

Peter paused. The smile slipped off his face, and he glanced away. "In the office."

The answer caught me off-guard. The office. Uncle Ben's office.

"Oh," I said, the humor dying from my voice. After a moment, I frowned. "I didn't know you still went in there."

"I don't," Peter said, his tone stiff. He set down his place, still not looking at me as he got up and left the couch. "I just thought you wanted to see that."

I wasn't sure what to say to that. My gaze followed Peter as he headed back into the kitchen, and I couldn't help but wonder if I said something wrong. It occurred to me once again that Peter rarely talked about Uncle Ben. Not even about the good times. I frowned to myself, picking at the carpet beneath me.

"Is everything okay, Peter?" I asked after a long moment, still wondering if I was saying the right thing. I wasn't good at this emotional stuff. I had no idea what my next move was going to be, depending on how Peter reacted.

"Sure, why wouldn't I be?" He said lightly, but it sounded forced.

"Because," I said, licking my lips, peering around the couch to watch him. Peter had his back towards me, so I couldn't read his expression. "You just...never say anything. At all. Not even his name. It's like Uncle Ben never even existed now."

"What? No, I don't!"

"Yes, you did! You did it, just now! You didn't even say his name when you talked about his office. It's not like anyone else uses it."

Peter turned on me, mouth open but nothing coming out. He looked too worked up to make a quick comeback, scowled, then said, "I don't know! It just came out that way! It doesn't mean anything. What are you, a shrink now?"

Yep, just like I thought. Made things worse. I wanted to kick myself.
"N-no," I said, starting to get nervous. I didn't expect him to get so defensive. "I just noticed —"

"Well, cut it out!" Peter snapped, making me flinch. "There's nothing wrong with me! I'm not the one who needs to be psychoanalyzed here."

I blinked, my regret vanishing all in a moment, replaced by something hot in my chest and in my face. I would've said something if I wasn't so surprised to begin with. I just didn't see it coming. In the back of my mind, it acted as confirmation to my fears; that Peter knew about my nightmares, that he knew more was going on than I realized. And he never said anything until now? This was how he wanted to say it?

Peter's face went blank almost immediately, as if his mind just restarted and he realized what he said. Too late, he started to stammer, "No, wait, I didn't mean —"

"I know what you meant." I said, turning away sharply. Without thinking, I started grabbing books and papers at random, stacking them haphazardly. I wasn't sure where the death certificate went. Probably somewhere in the mess. At that moment, I was too angry to care.

I stood up, arms full with work. Peter just stood there helplessly in the kitchen. I thought he might say something, until Aunt May appeared. She paused and glanced between the two of us, as if sensing the tension. She frowned at me, "Mia, what's wrong?"

"I'm going to my room," I said, my jaw working as I bit back a barbed answer. I had a good comeback for Peter but I wasn't going to say it in front of May. This situation was already pretty bad, and as angry as I was, I didn't want a full-blown family fight. I just wanted to be alone. So instead, I came up with a much more diplomatic reply. "Someplace where I won't get distracted."

Aunt May looked utterly baffled by this, but I wasn't in the mood to explain myself. Still, as I made for the hallway, I got close enough to Peter to say in a quiet tone, "Yeah, maybe I have issues, Peter. But so do you."

His eyes widened, face paling when I left him. On the way back to my room, I passed Uncle Ben's office. The door was cracked open.

I glanced at it once, then moved on.

I wouldn't know how right I was about Peter until much later.

✮✮✮

The cold air was a welcome relief on my cheeks.

I was in Central Park, taking a stroll with Dmitri, the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. I had suggested to go outside today, as being cooped up for the past week had given me a bad case of cabin fever. It was all I could do right now to not burst into a full sprint, I just had so much pent-up energy to burn.

Luckily the Park was only a few blocks away from Lincoln Plaza, and Dmitri seemed to be enjoying it. For the sake of my own sanity I decided it was going to be an easy day today, and we only brought flashcards to study his science terms. They were in both English and Russian to help him out.
Unfortunately, I wasn't really reading them while Dmitri was guessing the definitions, so I was a little surprised when I felt a nudge in my side. "Hmm?"

"Is it right? Newton's three laws," Dmitri told me. "I said them twice but you didn't react."

"Oh, sorry, s-say them again?" I shook my head, my eyes refocusing on the scribbled writing. The notecards flapped in the wind, and I distracted myself reshuffling them as Dmitri repeated what he said earlier. "Yeah, that's right, you got them. Good job."

Dmitri paused on the sidewalk and I stopped a few feet ahead. He titled his head. "Is everything all right, Mia? You seem distracted. Is it about your finals tomorrow?"

The day was beautiful, blue sky and bright sun. Bird calls filled the air, the rustle of branches, masking the annoying traffic in the distance. Frost glittered on the trees and grass, and there were bright spots of color from people passing by, like Dmitri's red hat or my yellow shoes. Some kids were running around down the field, playing tag or something. It was too nice a day to be dealing with any of this.

"No," I said, then corrected myself. "Well, yes but… no."

Dmitri struggled to suppress a confused smirk. "What answer is no-yes-no? Is this an American thing I don't understand?"

"It's, ah," I pursed my lips, smiling a little too, but out of embarrassment. I looked down, scuffed my heel against some fallen leaves. "It's nothing. Just family stuff at home. My cousin and I got into an argument yesterday and… well, he hasn't said a word to me since."

"Oh." Dmitri said, and for a long moment I didn't expect him to add anything. It wasn't like he knew me all that well, or had the personal investment of a friend. But then he said, "What did you fight about?"

I heaved a sigh. Perhaps sensing this was about to get much more personal, Dmitri drew nearer, and I spoke in a low register, so a line of folks by a pretzel vendor wouldn't overhear. "Last spring my Uncle Ben died in a carjacking. My cousin, Peter, they were really close. But he hasn't said anything about Ben since I got back. Maybe even longer. When I asked about it, he got defensive, then he said I needed a psychologist but in a… less nice way."

I had been extremely tempted to ask Ned about it. If anyone knew Peter better than me, it would be him. He'd know what Peter's behavior about Uncle Ben was all about. But I was afraid that if I asked him, he'd tell Peter, and then Peter would know I was talking behind his back.

And those words kept coming back to haunt me. *I'm not the one who needs to be psychoanalyzed here.*

What did that mean? Well, I knew what it *meant*, that Peter thought I needed help, but with that? What made him say that? Was I really so different now? And different in a bad way, on top of it all. Had I come back from the Crucible a total freak?

"You need a psychologist?" Dmitri looked surprised, and when I threw him a look, he held up his hands. "Oh, not the point, sorry. Continue, please."

"No, I don't need a psychologist," I rolled my eyes, even as doubt crept up my stomach. "The point is, it pissed me off and now we aren't talking at all, and I don't know how to fix it. I was sort of sorry for bringing it up to begin with, but after Peter said that… I just, I don't know, I'm still angry about it. I don't feel guilty."
"Wouldn't hurt to apologize," Dmitri suggested, shrugging. "Maybe you are not in the wrong, but you weren't there when it happened, yes?"

"Yeah, I was away," I muttered, hating the answer and how helpless and stupid it made me feel.

"Well, perhaps Peter feels alone," Dmitri said. "He may not say anything because he doesn't feel that you would understand."

"How could I not understand?" I demanded with a raised voice, throwing out my hands. "Uncle Ben was my family, too! It hurt when I found out what happened. I didn't know what to do. I don't even know what really happened. And Peter doesn't talk about anything. Not even to Aunt May. I just get this bad feeling that he's hiding something from me."

"Maybe you would understand, but he doesn't know that," Dmitri pointed out. "It's very different from his perspective, yes? Logically, yes, you would be — what is the word, emphatic? Empathetic? If it were me, and it was my mother or father who died, I would find it very difficult to speak to anyone about it. It is not about logic, it's about emotion. And to Peter, I imagine all he feels is grief and loneliness."

I took this all in silently, stuffing my hands in my pockets. "Great. Emotion. My specialty."

Dmitri chuckled softly, running his hand along the back of a bench as we walked by. "Yes, I got the sense that you are a very...cold kind of person."

"Cold?" I repeated, frowning at the sound of it. I didn't think myself as cold.

"Sorry, not cold exactly, you are very kind," Dmitri scrunched up his face as he reconsidered his word choice. "Perhaps that was not the best way to put it. But you do not, er, show very much, I suppose you could say. You keep privacy to yourself. We have had three meetings so far and only now I learn of what your other life is like, while you know much of mine."

"What? No, I don't, I barely know anything about you."

"You know what I do, where I go to school, where I live," Dmitri listed off, making me feel worse and worse. "That my mother is a journalist and my father is a banker. I do not know what your parents do, or where you go to school, or if you live in the city or the suburbs. All I know is that you show up on time and that you are very smart."

"You also know that I'm an athlete," I added, recalling the time we first met. "You don't know a lot about me or Peter, but you seem pretty good at knowing who we are, Dmitri."

"It is merely guesswork," Dmitri said with a shrug, although he looked pleased by the complement. "For me, it is easy to step into another person's shoes and see what they see. But please, do not take my word for what I said earlier. I do not know you very well, or Peter at all, besides what you have told me. I may be very wrong. But I do still think apologizing cannot hurt your cause. As long as you are sincere, of course."

I thought it over. As much as saying 'sorry' made me to cringe and retreat, it was at least somewhat true. I did feel sorry, as angry as I was, and even though I didn't tell Dmitri, Peter was maybe a little right, too. Maybe I did need help. It wasn't like I was entirely forthcoming with him, either. I didn't talk any more about Mom than Peter did about Uncle Ben.

Still, the air was tense at home, and I was still unsure what Peter really thought of me. How would he see me apologizing? Would it really help? Or would it just make it worse?
At least I had a recourse, something to do if I could come up with nothing else. For now, though, I decided to wait. I figured I could hold out from apologizing until after the tests tomorrow. Maybe I wasn't that sorry just yet, and studying was as good as an excuse as any.

It didn't help that I hadn't told Aunt May anything that happened, or anyone else (Ned out of the question). Honestly, I was afraid of getting her involved; Aunt May might force us to make up to each other before either of us was ready, and I was not in the mood to place nice at the moment. I hadn't told Michelle, either, in case she decided to use it as ammunition. I didn't know what she had against him but I didn't want Peter angry at me for getting my friends to gang up on him.

Maybe that's why I didn't feel totally off telling Dmitri about this. Awkward, sure, but not unsafe. Dmitri was, for all intents and purposes, a complete stranger to my life. I didn't have to worry about him running into anyone I knew, having any personal biases to work around. It was nice to have a sounding board to bounce some thoughts off of.

Still, I did feel a little guilty dumping all this crappy emotional stuff on him. "Sorry. I didn't mean to get so heavy with you. I know this isn't what you asked for when you asked for a tutor."

"No, no, it's fine!" Dmitri smiled, shaking his head. "It may sound strange, but I like hearing a bit of this 'heavy' stuff from you. Makes you seem less...superhuman."

"Superhuman? Me?" I giggled nervously, hoping the flush in my cheeks didn't make me look too guilty. "No, I'm just another imperfect mortal in an imperfect world. And, uh, to clear the air — I go to Midtown School of Science and Technology. I grew up in Hell's Kitchen but now I live in Queens. I never knew my father. And my mom...she died during the Incident."

"Oh," Dmitri seemed bright and interested up until that last part, and he ducked his head. "I'm sorry. I heard it was very bad, when the aliens attacked. I was in Russia at the time, but I watched it on the news and it was...very chilling. Where were you?"

There it was, that same goddamn question. I sighed, shrugged. "I was in Russia, too. I guess I was lucky."

Dmitri let out a low whistle. "We were in the same city at the same time? Incredible! A wonder how we never ran into each other."

I knew he was joking but I still felt a little defensive, considering I had never been to St. Petersburg and now had to maintain the lie ever since I opened my big stupid mouth. "I don't know, we don't exactly run in the same circles. You with your dancing and me with my...whatever you want to call it. How did you end up in dancing, anyways?"

"Ballet, you mean?" Dmitri asked, casting me a wry look. "Yes, I am probably not what you think of when you hear ballet dancer. And it's not a very popular or manly sport for boys, but I assure you, it's just as challenging as baseball or football or soccer or whatever you call it here."

"Oh, I believe you," I said. I had arrived early today, and during the end of rehearsal had witnessed Dmitri lifting a ballerina into the air during their performance. Even now, I could tell he had a far better gait than me, graceful and smooth. I was a little hunched forward, slightly on the balls of my feet, and not looking nearly as relaxed. "I don't know anything about dancing, but you look really good on stage. I think I said that before. Sorry if I'm repeating myself. You're just...you're stronger than you look, I guess."

Dmitri grinned. "Oh, please, continue! I do not complain when people are complimenting me."
I elbowed him, feigning annoyance, and he laughed, shying away a little. Trying not to laugh myself, I said, "Oh, very funny, Wisenheimer. Why don't you put that ego of yours to work and tell me the definition of Ohm's Law?"

Dmitri paused, then threw me a disgruntled look. "That is not on the cards. You're being mean to me. Oh, you are! You're not even sorry!"

I couldn't hide the shit-eating grin on my face. "It's a physics question, isn't it? You should know it anyways."

"You science kids and your laws," Dmitri scoffed in a fake-mocking tone, holding his nose up in the air. "We have no need of that silliness on the stage."

"Oh, my god, you're a riot, you know that, Dmitri?" I shook my head, hiding an ugly snort behind the cards. "Hey, do you have any nicknames?"

"My father calls me Dima," Dmitri admitted, his cheeks flushing. At first, I thought it was the cold, but then I realized he was embarrassed when he gave me a wincing look. "It's for a child. And Russian. No one calls me that here. Not even my mother and she barely ever listens to me. I would die if the director heard about it."

I believed him. I bit back a smile as I asked, "Can I call you Dima?"

"Absolutely not." His look was stern. "Unless you want me to call you Amelia."

That sobered me up pretty quick. "Okay, okay, fair enough. Maybe we should just stick to the flash cards..."

✮✮✮

By Thanksgiving, it had gotten a little bit better, but not by much.

Peter started talking to me again, at least. In school, and when Aunt May was around. But never when we were alone, and never about particularly deep topics. It was clear he was just dancing around the issue. Maybe he was afraid if he spoke to me for too long, I'd bring up Uncle Ben again. And I was a little afraid to talk to him, too. Our last argument had thrown up too many questions, and I no longer trusted that Peter saw me the way I wanted him to. I had no idea what he really thought of me, and the uncertainty ate away at me, like a dog at an old bone. I was afraid that if I continued to interact with Peter, he'd find more and more things wrong with me.

Least to say, it was awful and Aunt May was starting to notice.

She never said anything specifically, but I could feel her eyes on me throughout the day. We helped with making dinner but even then, we were quiet, only affording each other the strictest of politeness, for Aunt May's sake. By the time everything was ready, it was completely dark out, but we could see the city skyline in the distance, countless lights glittering as another million or so other families shared the same meal as us.

It felt strange, setting up the table this year. We always celebrated Thanksgiving as a family. Now, there were two empty settings at the table meant for five, and it felt so hard to pretend that everything
was all right.

I tried not to stare at the spot where Mom used to sit as I took my place. Usually I sat next to Peter, but he decided to take the place opposite me on the table, with Aunt May at the end. Between all of us, the giant golden-brown turkey rested on a festive platter, surrounded by the gravy boat, cranberry stuff, mashed potatoes, bread rolls, and green bean casserole. The same thing every year, a classic, but now it looked almost too much for just three people.

For most of the day, I hadn't considered myself very hungry. But even in my current emotional state, I had to admit, the look of the food, all the smells, had my mouth watering.

"Before we start," Aunt May began at the head of the table, drawing our gazes from the food to her. In the background, the TV played the news on a muted level. She laced her fingers together on the table in front of her. "I just wanted to say a few things. Some things I'm thankful for. Maybe a few prayers, too."

I smiled but didn't say anything, knowing that this was going to be the hard part. Listing what I was thankful for. Another tradition. I studied the plates before me, the special dinnerware we only pulled out once or twice a year. They were so well-taken care of there weren't any scratches from previous meals on them. Everything was perfect tonight. The same could not be said for how we were feeling.

I still didn't look at Peter. I could feel him avoiding me.

"I'm thankful that the radiator was finally fixed," Aunt May continued, taking a deep breath. "That I didn't burn the turkey, or the casserole. That somehow all of this is still possible, even after everything that's happened. And I'm thankful that I've got two of the strongest kids here with me. You've endured a lot these past few years, you two, and I'm so proud of you. Peter, I know you dropped band, but it's nice to see you doing other things, too. Decathlon is a good choice, all things considered. And I know you'll do well on your tests this weekend, Mia. We're all rooting for you. I'm glad that I still have both of you to keep me sane and drive me crazy."

She said it with a teasing note, but I couldn't help but feel embarrassed. May had to know something was going on, but for the sake of peace she wasn't asking. Maybe she hoped we'd say it ourselves. I wasn't sure if I was ready yet. I tucked my hands under the table, struggling to come up with words to say. But I was interrupted before I ever got a chance to speak.

"I'll go next," Peter said. His eyes were focused on his plate, his hands on either side, tightened into loose fists as he worked out his thoughts. "I, um, I guess I'm thankful for my new winter coat. And the internship at Stark Industries. It's helped me...it's helped me figure out what I want to do with my life. How I can help people." He took a deep breath. "And I'm thankful for Uncle Ben."

I looked up in surprise. Peter glanced at me, held my gaze for a moment, then went back to his plate as he continued. "I-I wish he was here. I wish I could tell him that...I am the way I am because of him. But I guess telling you guys that is the next best thing."

A soft look crossed May's face, and she took Peter's hand. She didn't say anything, but the gesture meant enough.

Then they both looked to me.

I was still processing what Peter said. I didn't think he'd say anything at all. It wasn't quite an apology, but I still understood what he meant.

So, I felt I owed him one. "I guess I'm thankful for all the second chances I've gotten. With school
and with...life. I'm thankful that I'm here with you again. There was a time when I thought I'd never make it home, where I thought I'd never be able to have this again. Even though a lot of things are different now, I'm glad we're safe."

For once, that seemed to be the right thing to say. I guess it helped that it was also true. Peter smiled at me for the first time in nearly a week. And during Thanksgiving dinner, we started to talk again — not a lot, but it felt sincere this time.

"I think Flash is trying to get me kicked off the Decathlon team," Peter mused, resting his cheek on one hand as he played with his casserole. "He keeps making complaints to Mr. Harrington, but at least he isn't taking it seriously. Michelle thinks it's hilarious, though. She keeps drawing stupid pictures of me even after I told her to stop..."

I didn't hear him because my ears had just caught what the news was saying on TV.

"...another suicide bombing, this time in downtown Los Angeles." The news woman said to the camera, standing on a frantic street in a city. It was still daylight there — night had not yet fallen on California. "Occurred just a few hours ago. A total of 42 people are confirmed dead, hundreds more wounded, and the numbers continue to rise. Witnesses claim they saw a very distraught man shouting, perhaps mentally unstable, panicking, stumbling through the square before the explosion went off. He seemed to be armed with a high-powered explosive that mineralized anything within a fifty-foot radius. Little remains of the square now, as you can see, aside from the shadows of the victims. Video evidence, as shown on these images taken by both security cameras and civilian phones, reveals the face of the bomber before he attacked. Police are investigating, but can find no evidence of any extremist ties. There have been no claims for responsibility, which in a year that has been besieged with attacks by Al Qaeda and the Ten Rings, seems like a strange relief..."

"Mia?" Aunt May asked, her voice seeming to echo from a distance. It took her hand on mine to pull my attention from the TV screen. Her brow was knit in worry as she said, "Oh, your nose is bleeding! Here, get a napkin — are you feeling okay?"

I started, hand drawing up to my face, withdrawing with blood. Peter was staring at me. It wouldn't be until later why I understood the flash of fear across his face.

"Y-yes, I'm fine," I lied, pressing a napkin to my face. My hands were starting to shake a little. "Just, um, just a little light-headed..."

I glanced at the TV again. At the image of the bomber.

A man, mid-thirties, with blond hair. I recognized him. An Extremis soldier.

Images flashed in my head. Snow in the summer. The Crucible. Surrounded by glowing-eyed mercenaries, taking turns beating me to a pulp. This one in particular had an annoying laugh that echoed in my head, a strong American southern accent that seemed so out-of-place in the KGB.

And now he was dead.

His name was John Vint. It would take police another four hours before they'd be able to confirm his identity.

My dinner wasn't completely ruined, but I was distracted throughout the rest of it. Aunt May shut off the TV but the words still rang in my head. *A distraught man shouting, perhaps mentally unstable, panicking...no claims of responsibility...*-

The Ten Rings couldn't wait to take responsibility for the *HMS Adelaide*, destroyed by another
Extremis agent. But now, they remained quiet, even after dozens of civilians were killed?

What was going on here? What had provoked Vint into going nuclear?

It was strange enough that when the phone rang later that night, I wasn't completely surprised. Something had to have happened. Something related to me. It sounded crazy and maybe a little self-centered at first. Since Aunt May had gone to bed early after a busy day, I was the one who picked up the phone.

"Hello?"

"Amelia Fletcher?" Came a gruff male voice on the other side. I only recognized it after he said, "It's Agent Burke from the FBI."

"I-I remember," I said, my stomach dropping. Already doubt was rising; this couldn't be good, not at this hour. "Is something wrong?"

Agent Burke heaved a long sigh. "I was just informed a few minutes ago that Ellen Brandt has made bail. She's at large again."

My heart stopped. Ringing filled my ears. My breath caught in my throat.

I flew out of my room in a panic. Agent Burke was still on the phone, but I was no longer listening. The phone was still in my hand when I made for the first person I could think of.

His door was closed. I knew he was in there, I heard the banging of his dresser drawers earlier. I didn't even think of knocking before bursting in. There was already panic and tears in my voice when I called, "Peter —!"

I came to a stop. The room was freezing. The curtains fluttered. The window was cracked open.

Peter's room was empty. He'd snuck out.
they say he used to be one of the best

...before he lost his way

THE CHAIRMAN

edit made by me :) I wanted to put this in a more relevant chapter, but then i got impatient so here you go
Chapter Forty-Two

Alright after my last update I realized I screwed up my timeline and made November like two weeks longer than it really is. So it's really only been a week since Mia started school, and her Finals happen after Thanksgiving instead of before. Also thank you for all the comments and reviews, I've been reading them and planning a few edits, so it's great to get feedback ^_^

Chapter Forty-Two

✮

Three weeks in and whatever sense of safety I had evaporated in a single moment.

Upon discovering Peter gone, I rushed back to my room. Grabbed the backpack under my bed. Pulled out the photos. Went to my desk, took an envelope from a drawer. Stuff the originals inside. I had copies on my computer. More on a flash drive — put that in another envelope. Ran to the kitchen in search of postage stamps.

Agent Burke spoke the whole time. "I know this isn't what you want to hear, but I promise that you're safe, Mia. We're keeping watch on her. By no means is Ellen Brandt going to come in contact with you again. You'll never have to see her until the trial."

"Yeah, right," I snorted, to myself, but I was breathing so hard it sounded like a gasp.

I went through one kitchen drawer after another, slamming them shut when I couldn't find the stamps.

My heart pounded in my chest. My hands shook, fumbling with the knobs. I wasn't paying attention to the noise I was making.

"Mia?" Aunt May appeared out of nowhere, making me drop the phone in surprise.

It clattered to the floor, the batteries tumbling out — effectively ending the call with Burke. I couldn't remember what he'd been saying last. I stumbled back against the counter, the floor shifting suddenly beneath my feet.

"Mia!" My reaction alarmed Aunt May, who held up her hands, worry all over her face. "Lord, what's wrong? I heard all this noise and — Mia, calm down! You're hyperventilating!"

I sank to the floor, hand on my chest. I knew she meant well, but being told to calm down really wasn't helping.

The envelopes had fell from my hand, scattered on the floor. May didn't seem to notice them as she took my shoulders, but I couldn't pull my eyes away from them. They were all I had, all the proof I'd
acquired since the Crucible, that something else, something bigger was going on. I didn't know what. I didn't know why. I just knew that Brandt knew, and that I knew just enough to be a problem.

That she'd come back.

That she'd kill me.

It was illogical. Somewhere deep down, I knew I was overreacting. I was panicking for no real reason. Burke had sounded concerned, not alarmed, when he gave me the news. To him, the problem was well in hand. Brandt wouldn't risk making it worse for herself or her employer by attacking me — a person with a now public name, someone the FBI had an eye on — or getting the Ten Rings involved, when they currently weren't under any suspicion whatsoever.

But Brandt wasn't sane, was she? She hated me. Maybe she hated me enough to get revenge, the consequences be damned. Who cares if the Ten Rings was exposed in another plot so long as they and the Crucible got rid of one of their most problematic failures? In the end, I was a mistake that came back to haunt them. Would they risk it happening again?

All these thoughts ran through my head at a million miles an hour. I could see May in front of my face, speaking, but I couldn't really hear her, couldn't focus long enough. My hands were still shaking. My breath shuddered in my chest. Brandt could come bursting through the front door at any moment. She could burn this whole place down. Hell, she could blast it right off the face of the earth.

And what would I do then?

"...Mia...Mia, look at me...can you hear me...?" May's voice echoed, a thousand miles away. Her hand waved in front of my face. My heartbeat drowned her out.

I could see her. I could see Mom. I wondered if she had ever been this afraid. If she had ever been afraid of dying. If she ever felt like I was feeling right now.

Was she scared, when the aliens attacked? Did she know? Did she know she was going to die that day?

How long? How long did it take her to die?

How long would it take for me to die?

I was crying. I could feel the warm tears streaming down my face. I brought up my hands, covered my head, curled up into a ball. Maybe if I made myself small again, they wouldn't find me. Maybe I could find a way to be safe again. I closed my eyes and cried harder. It wasn't a sad cry. It was the panicked breaths and shuddering gasps of a person trapped, a person terrified, a person who, in that moment, couldn't see any hope.

Thirteen again. A little girl too small for the world.

The darkness was soothing, a little. I tried to measure my breathing on my own, but it was hard with my racing thoughts. I knew I couldn't last this way. That emotional breakdowns would get me killed. This was what the Crucible had trained to get rid of. I was better than this. I was stronger than this.

But I didn't want to be what they made me, either.

"— May, what's going on —" Peter's voice broke through my thoughts. His footsteps pounded against the floor as he rushed into the kitchen. From where? I didn't hear the front door slam. My mind tried to recall where he had been last.
Peter slipped on the tile when he skidded to a stop. "— oh no, what happened —"

Aunt May was starting to sound frantic as well. I didn't blame her. She was trying to figure out what was wrong with me, but I was inconsolable. "— something happened, she was on the phone. Do you know who —"

"— I don't know, she was the one who picked it up —"

" — Mia, you need to talk to us, you need to tell us who called you —"

But I couldn't answer, at least not coherently. Eventually Peter managed to collect the phone parts, stick the batteries back in. Star-sixty-nine, and got an answer on the other end. He held the phone to May, who gave me one last worried look before taking it and speaking to the voice on the other end.

She stood up, paced away, and Peter took her place on the floor in front of me. His hands were on my knees. He was trying to get me to uncover my face.

"Mia, come on, everything's fine." Peter seemed to know I was afraid, maybe knew what I needed to hear. "I swear, no one's going to hurt you, not if I can help it."

It was a strange promise, stranger with the vehemence he said it. I peered at him through wet, red eyes, the muscles in my face pinched as I studied his face.

I didn't believe him.

"Where were you?" I whispered, my voice hoarse.

Peter blinked, brow drawing together. "What?"

"Where were you?" I asked again, my fists clenched in my hair, pulling, trying to ground myself in the pain. "I looked for you. I went to you first. But you weren't there. The window was open. You were gone."

I knew I wasn't crazy when Peter's face turned white as a sheet. He really was gone. I'd caught him in something, but I didn't know what, and I wasn't in the mental state to compute it. Peter took his hands off my knees, glanced away. His answer was stammering: "Mia, you're not making any sense. I was here the whole time."

"Liar." The words were bitter, tinged by fear. I'd regret these words later, when I'd calmed down. At that point, though, it would be too late.

Peter shot me a look. Sharp, almost dangerous. I shouldn't be making these accusations. The same way I shouldn't have been accusing Killian of being a terrorist. I had no proof Peter was lying.

He didn't deny it, though.

We held a look — maybe a glare — for one long moment. A challenge? Peter still didn't say anything. I wasn't sure if he was planning to.

The silent battle was interrupted when May returned, phone in hand. She dropped down next to Peter, and looked directly into my eyes. "Amelia, I need you to listen to me. I just talked to Agent Burke, okay? Everything is well in hand. I know it's scary, but you're fine, you're safe. No one's going to hurt you again, do you understand…?"

Aunt May's reassurances gathered with the other garbled thoughts in my head. My eyes drifted back
to Peter's face. He was studying the floor, the design of the tiles. Sensing my attention, he glanced up, and I could see it in his eyes.

Fear.

But of what?

✮✮✮

December 1st.

The day of my finals.

Only a month ago, I was just starting the Eighth Grade. At least, that's what it felt like in my head. The memories were fresh enough that sometimes I felt like I was moving a step out of time, off-balance, unable to find the new rhythm.

The tests were a reminder of where I had been, and where I was now.

The fear kept me concentrated.

Thanksgiving night had been a nightmare — in the literal sense. I couldn't sleep. I was too terrified. Aunt May stayed with me the whole night. I eventually passed out from sheer exhaustion around 7:45AM the next morning. I'd gone for longer spans of time without sleep, but the news that Brandt had been freed kicked off an adrenalin rush, so when it finally wore off I had no energy left to go on.

By the time Saturday rolled around, I'd gotten back on sort-of even keeling. I was still absolutely terrified that Brandt might still show up, but at least I wasn't a crying wreck. I couldn't be, not if I wanted to pass these tests.

And I had to pass these tests. It was funny, in a way. I was almost as afraid of repeating ninth grade as I was of Brandt.

I had five tests over the course of the day, starting at nine and ending at two. Mr. Harrington supervised, making sure I didn't cheat or anything. Midtown wasn't sadistic and I not only had extra time to account for my dyslexia and slow writing, but I also had breaks between each one, to relax and snack a little, prep myself for the next one.

They might as well have locked me in a cage. I spent those thirty minutes between each test pacing up and down the empty hallway outside Mr. Harrington's classroom. The school was strangely cold and hollow with no one here. I didn't like hearing the sound of my own breathing. It was too loud. I preferred it when these halls were filled with voices, noise, even the banging of locker doors, as much as they set my teeth on edge.

But it was utterly quiet. Peaceful, even. Morita wanted me to have a little distraction as possible. Which was nice of him, but he didn't have the foresight of knowing that he'd scheduled the test at my worst mental state.

Still, I didn't struggle as much as I'd feared. I think the hardest test was English. It was always the class I struggled with the most in past years. I fought tooth and nail for every A I earned in those classes.
For the finals, I'd spent most of my time on studying the material for this class. We never did plays in middle school English, and the finals had been on two Shakespeare plays I obviously hadn't touched before. Reading those two in less than a month had not been fun. It was bad enough trying to parse through Middle English or whatever the hell it was — but I still didn't really understand what subtext was, or how to recognize it when reading something. Especially not in something like classic literature.

I decided from there on out I hated Shakespeare and everything he stood for.

So after, what, five hours of this, I finally made it to the end of my tests. The last one, Chemistry, had been a breeze. I liked solving things with definite answers — it had a strangely soothing effect, especially considering how I was feeling lately.

When I got up to hand in the packet, Mr. Harrington looked up from his paperback and smiled at me. "Well done, Mia! Wasn't that a long day? You seemed pretty intense back there."

"Oh," I said, my voice dull. I was a little embarrassed that my fear had been so bad it still affected me, but I was too tired to really care. "Yeah. Been a little stressed out lately."

"Well, at least the hard part's over, right?" Mr. Harrington said with an oblivious smile, accepting the packet. "Now you can just kick back and watch the rest of the year go by. Then it's back to the grindstone in January. Won't that be exciting?"

I couldn't even conceive what January would be like for me. I still wasn't entirely convinced I'd live that long.

Stepping out of Midtown's front doors that afternoon, I realized — it's been forty-two days since I woke up in Sokovia. Forty-two days since I'd escaped the Crucible. Less than two months, and it felt like a decade had passed.

Just thinking about it wore me down. How much longer could I keep this up?

Peter was sitting on the steps, waiting for me. I'd gotten his texts earlier, but hadn't read them — I'd guessed what he'd sent me, but I'd been privately hoping he wouldn't be here. I was still processing what was going on, and after what I said to him on Thanksgiving, I wasn't ready to face the consequences just yet.

But when he stood up and smiled, I wondered if it even happened at all. "Hey, Mia. How'd it go?"

"Fine, I s'pose," I shrugged, glancing over my shoulder. Not because I was thinking of the tests, but because I had the odd feeling someone was following me. But there was no one there, and I turned back to Peter, eyes to the ground. "Was going stir-crazy. Just glad it's over."

I wasn't intentionally speaking in clipped sentences, but I could tell Peter was picking up on it. His eyebrows rose uncertainly. "Uh-huh."

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. There was a tone to his voice that I recognized. Peter wanting to say something but not. "What?"

"Nothing. Never mind."

He started walking away. I followed him, deciding not to push it.

I didn't know what to say, really. This was a different argument than before, and personally, I had higher priorities. Managing my intense reaction levels, for instance, as we headed towards the street,
and the traffic got louder and the sidewalks busier. The sound of screeching brakes and car honking set my teeth on edge. I didn't like being in the middle of the city. I just wanted to go back inside and cover my ears so I didn't have to hear anything again. I wasn't sure if us heading towards the subway was a good choice or a bad one.

There was traffic in front of a school as a white van tried to merge into traffic from where it had been parked on the curb. Aggrieved honking filled the air, and I was relieved as we started heading away from it.

"Are you okay?" The question seemed to pop out of nowhere. I found myself yanking my attention from the faces of people passing by to look at Peter. He was giving me a genuinely concerned look.

I considered lying. "No, n-not really."

"Oh," Peter nodded, pressing his lips together. It wasn't the answer he wanted to hear, but it was probably the one he knew was right. "I... I kind of figured."

Again, he cut himself off before heading anywhere with that line of thought. I frowned at him, wondering what Peter was thinking. Why was he holding back? For my benefit, or his?

Another stretch of silence fell between us. We weren't going at a particularly fast pace, but I kind of wanted to. My shoulders were hunched and I couldn't get my muscles to relax. I just wanted to get home as fast as possible. Being outside like this was making me nervous. Earlier, I had been dying to get out of school, and now I wanted nothing more than to go back inside and find a nice dark corner to sequester myself in.

"Can I ask you a question?" Peter's voice broke my reverie again.

I threw him a slightly annoyed look. "Another one?"

He ducked his head, embarrassed. "I just...sorry. I've just been thinking a lot. I mean, I always wanted to ask — about your tattoo. That star. Where did you get it?"

"Oh." For once, I was caught off guard. I worked my jaw, turned my attention to the way ahead. "Sokovia."

For a second, I panicked, before I remembered that Peter already knew about that. I'd forgotten I'd told him, and Peter didn't look entirely surprised by the answer. His next question: "Why?"

"W-Why?" I repeated, confused.

"Yeah. Why did you get it?" Peter asked me, as if it were obvious what he meant. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know," I lied, because saying Communist Russia sounded a little alarming. "It wasn't a-a choice."

I might as well have told him the truth, because Peter looked disturbed by this. "What? You mean — you mean they did that to you?"

"Yeah."

"So that's why you hide it." There was an air of revelation to this, as if answering another burning question of Peter's.
"I don't hide it," I snapped, annoyed, although that was straight-up untrue. Luckily the season permitted long sleeves so it didn't seem strange, but I had been strictly avoiding anything that exposed my shoulders, even at home. "I just don't like looking at it."

"Uh-huh," Peter said, and I knew he saw right through me. "So, they did that to...brand you? Mark you as something?"

I threw him a glance, a strange lump forming in my throat. I couldn't tell if it felt like I was choking or about to cry. Either way, extremely uncomfortable. I swallowed at the obstruction and glared at an innocent passerby, who shrank away in response. "I don't really want to talk about this right now."

"Oh, sorry," Peter winced. At least he seemed to mean it. "I didn't mean to be...never mind. I just, I want to know. I'm scared."

"Scared?" My brow furrowed. That wasn't what I expected to hear. What did he have to be scared of?

"Scared. Because of what happened to you." Peter said, and when he met my gaze, he couldn't hold it for very long. He just shook his head helplessly. "Obviously, you don't talk about it. Not that that's a problem but...the way Agent Burke told us, it was like...you'd been taken for a reason. That bad stuff happened."

The way he phrased it just made me roll my eyes. "Yeah, bad stuff happened. You're right, they took me for a reason. It wasn't just random. If you really want me to talk, fine. What else do you want to know?"

I had said it flippantly, mostly to combat my own rising discomfort.

Fear had an interesting effect. After the initial shock wore off, I found myself able to think more clearly, more quickly than before. It was like I'd been seeing the world through foggy lenses, and only now could I see clear, everything in minute detail, every movement, every sound.

Like the effect of the menthol in a peppermint when you put it in your mouth, and suddenly the air you breathe was crisper, colder, sharper. The chill in my veins, the prickles up my spine. That's how I felt now, every sense awake and alive.

The way Mr. Harrington sniffed once every five minutes, on average, during the tests. The way the sound of traffic ebbed and flowed outside the windows on hourly intervals. The ticking of the clock. The scrape of my shoes on the sidewalk. The rustle of Peter's coat, the way the hair bounced off his forehead with each step. Didn't that bother him? Didn't he notice?

Was it just me? Was I the only one liked this? Was I crazy, for the way fear acted on me?

"Why did they take you?" Peter asked. "Why you?"

I worked it over in my head first before I answered. "I guess I was special to them. I had the right...traits, and they wanted to use me."

"Use you? For what?"

I shrugged. I had outpaced Peter a little bit, maybe my anxiety making me walk a little faster, but I was only a few feet away, so I only heard him when he continued hesitantly: "...a sex ring?"

"Oh, Jesus, no," I cringed, spinning around and rushing back to Peter, shaking my head, hands up before he could get any farther with that idea. "Peter, no, no, no. It wasn't a —" I couldn't even make
myself say it, the idea too horrendous. My voice dropped to a whisper so passerby couldn't overhear us. "It wasn't that. God, no. I swear, nothing like that."

I paused, then said, "W-wait, is that what you thought happened to me? This whole time?"

Peter gave me a helpless shrug, making a face. "I guess. Or something like it. It's not exactly something you can just ask."

He had a point, and I felt bad. How long had he been living with that kind of reality? Being in a sex ring was a very specific kind of baggage that I, thankfully, did not have. So, I said, "No, they didn't take me for that. It wasn't trafficking, or whatever they call it. It was — they were part of a cult. And they kidnapped me, and o-other kids to...to create soldiers. Weapons. For their cause."

"Seriously?" Peter was so stunned he came to a complete stop on the sidewalk. I stopped, too, my shoulders nearly hunched up to my ears. "Why? What do they want?"

I had just opened my mouth to respond when, next to me, on the street, a car blared its horn, sharp and sudden.

Next thing I knew, I was on the ground. Peter was a few steps ahead, looking back at me in alarm. "Mia? Mia, are you okay?"

My breath was coming out in sharp gasps. I shook my head, squeezed my eyes shut. Tried to push the images from Novi Grad out of my head.

"I'm f-f-fine." I stammered, taking Peter's offered hand, letting him pull me to my feet. "Just st-startled, that's all."

It was then I realized I couldn't shut off my fear.

"Are you sure?" Peter asked, but I was too busy looking around. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. The entrance of the subway was only ten meters away, but I found myself dwarfed by the tall buildings, the skyscrapers, the low cloud cover closing in.

Around us were dozens, hundreds of people, going about their business. I scanned each of their faces without intending to — looking for something, knowing something was here, knowing we were being watched.

I looked behind me. A blank white van, about three cars back, with dark windows and no signage. New York license plate number Q823FH2. I'd spotted it before, just outside of Midtown's front steps.

It was following us.

I made out the silhouette of the driver. A big man in dark shades, a nondescript uniform. White overalls, like a painter.

Only painters didn't wear wires in their ears.

"Mia?" Peter was tugging on my sleeve, trying to pull my attention back. But my eyes were riveted on the white van. "What's up? What're you looking at?"

The driver tilted his head ever so slightly. Although I couldn't see his eyes, I had the strange sensation we just made eye-contact.
He brought up a wrist to his mouth. I didn't wait to read his lips.

I bolted.

I heard Peter's cry of alarm but didn't register it. I just turned on my heel and ran across the street — straight through traffic, where a big van couldn't get through. I narrowly avoided getting hit by a taxi, leaping over its hood and hitting the sidewalk on the other side.

Classic fight-or-flight response. I knew that. I knew none of this would make any sense to Peter. But I didn't have time to explain it to him. We were in danger. We had to get away.

I regretted not telling him first. Peter wasn't used to being on the run. We weren't on the same page as I had been with the twins. When one of us ran, the others followed without question.

Shouting, honking, car doors slamming. I had alerted the men in the van that I was aware of them, and now they gave chase. But I already had a head start, and was much faster than the normal human. Fueled by fear and adrenalin, I would be running at top speed right now if it weren't for the packed sidewalk.

I bobbed and weaved around pedestrians, heading further up the street, trying to map out a route in my head. New York was old ground, I knew it all, but I couldn't think of anywhere safe to hide. I just had to outrun these guys, break their line of sight, as fast as possible.

I took a sharp turn right, down an alleyway. Random decision, really. Anything to throw them off my trail.

It split off in two directions. A wire fence blocked off access to the other end. I scaled it easily, jumping on a stack of wooden pallets before leaping right over the fence. A shoelace caught on one of the chain links and came undone, but I hit the ground running and didn't stop.

Reaching the end of the alley and entering another street, I went left up the street — startling a flock of pigeons and a loitering bird feeder on a bench. On my right, across the street, was an abandoned meat factory. It was covered in scaffolding and white tarp — another casualty of the alien attack. A nearby sign declared it as a homing project, to be rebuilt as condos.

It looked as good a place as any to hide.

It was easy to get inside. There was no one here. The weekend meant all construction was off-work. There were no doors, and plenty of gaping walls. All I had to do was cross the street, duck under the orange tape marking off the area, and slip behind the white tarp, fluttering in the wind.

It wasn't necessarily safe inside. There was exposed electrical wire, plenty of heavy tools and building supplies, unfinished pipes sticking out of ceilings and walls, ready to clothesline the unsuspecting person. Entire pieces of the floor and ceiling were missing. At least it was daylight, so I could see everything. At night, this place would be a complete death trap.

My footsteps echoed softly as I tread through. Wind whistled through all the openings in the building. I kept to the first floor, knowing escape would be easier the closer I was to ground level.

I was terrified those men in the van would find me here. Had I hidden too quickly? Were they rounding the building, trying to cut me off? I hadn't seen or heard anything yet. Maybe I lost them.

"Mia?"

I whirled around, swallowing a gasp before it could give me away.
But it didn't matter. Peter was standing in a vacant doorway, watching me with a… fragile look in his eyes. His cheeks were flushed, and he was panting slightly. He must have run pretty fast to catch up with me.

I hadn't heard anything. No footsteps, nothing. How did Peter get inside?

"Why did you run?" He had his hands raised, like someone dealing with a wild, skittish animal. "What the hell is going on? Who were those guys?"

"I-I —" my breath was caught in my throat. It felt like another asthma attack. I swallowed, shook my head. "Th-they were following us. They had to be — it had to be them! They were watching us, the entire time, and I hadn't even noticed —!"

It was strange. I was less afraid than I was angry at myself for slipping up. Behavior like this wouldn't last very long in the Crucible. I should've known what the white van was when I first saw it. How long had they been watching me? Ever since I got to school this morning? Ever since I left the apartment?

"It's not your fault!" Peter said, and a part of me was surprised that he didn't immediately call me crazy. He threw out his arms, saying, "We don't live lives in constant danger. It's not your job to look out for that kind of thing. You're just a teenager!"

"That's not an excuse!" There were no good excuses for this. I could hear the Winter Soldier's words in my head. You can be better. "What if they're after me again? What if they've been after me this entire time? I can't slip up, Peter! If I slip up, that's when they get me. And if they get me, then I'm dead, do you understand?!

"Who is they?" Peter demanded, voice rising with helplessness. I wasn't making any sense to him. I didn't know how. "You mean the people who took you? Do they even have a name?"

I opened my mouth, closed it, opened it again. Nothing came out. What could I say? What could I say that would make any sort of difference?

"Mia, come on," Peter pleaded, stepping closer to me. I wasn't a threat to him. I had no intention of doing any harm. But maybe he could see how I was rocking on the balls of my feet, ready to run again at any moment. "Why are you keeping secrets? You know you can trust me."

"Can I?" Again, those bitter words. I nearly spat them out, and Peter recoiled. "After you lied to me about sneaking out of the house? When you don't talk about Uncle Ben? I'm not the only one keeping secrets here."

Peter bristled. "Hey, that's different —"

"Is it?" I shot back, fists clenching and unclenching. "I trust you with my secrets, but you can't trust me with yours, is that how it goes?"

"You wouldn't understand —" Peter struggled for the words, but I was faster.

"I wouldn't understand?" I repeated, aghast. "I lost Uncle Ben, too, Peter! You don't think I don't know how it feels? I lost Mom! It's been the same thing for me!"

"No, it hasn't!" He shouted, ears and cheeks flushing with anger.

I just snorted, crossing my arms. "Oh yeah, how's that?"
"Because I lost you!" Peter blurted. Both of us went still, startled by this. Peter was breathing hard — I'd really gotten him worked up. For a second, his face was still blank with shock, as if he didn't realize what he'd said. Then his brow furrowed and he took a deep breath, saying, "When you — when you died, it was the first time I felt like I'd lost everything. I didn't think it could get any worse. But then Hedy died. And later Uncle Ben. You know how scared I was, of losing Aunt May, too? Or even Ned? I couldn't sleep for months. And then I started getting your messages."

His shoulders started to shake, and Peter's eyes fell to the floor. "It was like a nightmare. Or a dream. For the first time, I thought you might not actually be dead. And it hurt, because at that point I'd pretty much accepted the fact that you were gone. And I wanted you back so bad that I thought I might be going crazy. That maybe I was imaging all this, or I was getting obsessed. But I didn't know what else to do. I didn't want to give up. I didn't want to lose you again.

"And then you came back," Peter continued, throwing his arms up at me. He laughed, but it was brittle and had no humor in. "And you were different. But I didn't care, because it was still you underneath it all. I didn't realize how much you'd actually changed. I didn't realize how bad it would be. In a way, it still feels like I lost a part of you. It's never going to be like it used to be. I know that now. I'm sorry for what I said to you earlier. I guess...I guess I just wanted the old Mia back."

He finished with a sigh, and a quiet fell between us. Only the wind filled the air, and I found myself unable to pull my eyes from Peter. He looked exhausted, worn out.

"I'm sorry, too," I whispered. "I wish I could be her again, too. I wish I didn't have to...be this way anymore."

"Look, don't take it to heart, okay?" Peter asked me, face pinched with regret. "I don't mean I want the old Mia back now. It's not fair. Honestly, I'm just glad you came back at all."

That made me smile a little. "Yeah, me too. You're different, too, Peter. I-I'm not sure how yet, but you are."

"Really?" Peter looked surprised, maybe even amused by this. "I guess a lot can change in two years, huh?"

We shared a small laugh. For one second, everything felt good. Like it was going to turn out all right.
Then it was over, all too quick.

"Awww," a mocking voice interrupted us. Sharp footsteps echoed through the building, and both of us spun around to see a woman walk into the room, red hair dancing in the wind. "Isn't that sweet?"

I went rigid. Beside me, Peter shifted back on his feet, taken off guard.

Brandt gave us a poisoned smile. "Oh, no, did I just ruin the moment?"
instagram edit I made :}

mía fletcher don’t let me near your satellites

214 posts   102 followers   5 following

[Images of various photos, including a star, a text saying "YOU ARE MY SUNSHINE", and a statue.]
"Sorry I couldn't join the family reunion," Brandt said, stepping closer. "But I was...held up. I think I'll settle for you and the pipsqueak, though."

"Pipsqueak?" Peter scowled. "Who're you calling pip — hey!"

I stepped in front of him, clenching my fists. I didn't take my eyes off of Brandt. "Is that your plan? Attack us now? While I've still got the FBI on my back?"

"The FBI?" Brandt cocked an eyebrow. She was dressed like a civilian, hands tucked in a beige trench coat and shiny leather boots. "Oh, you mean those idiots in the white van you just ran from? Seems like your instincts need a little tuning, Amelia. Feeling a little antsy lately?"

_They were FBI?_ I blinked, surprised, then wanted to kick myself. I had been spooked by the same guys trying to protect me. And even worse, Brandt was right; I couldn't think of a quick enough comeback.

"Oh, you thought it was over, didn't you?" Brandt asked, with a mocking sad tone. "Poor baby. Thought she was going to live the rest of her life with her family, pretending she's normal, pretending everything's fine. Did you really think you could leave my world behind? It's a part of you now, Amelia. You can't escape it."

"Leave her alone!" Peter's shout echoed off the walls. Next thing I knew, he was in front of me, taking a wide stance — as if he was actually going to fight Brandt.

"Aww, that's so sweet," Brandt just laughed at the display. "You two, so protective of each other. Reminds me of those little raggedy Mutant pets you had, Amelia. Now, whatever happened to them? They never did follow you here, did they?"

Peter faltered. "Wait, Mutants?"

I winced internally, already sensing Brandt's revelry at being given this ammunition. Her eyebrows shot up, her wide grin expected. "Oh, she didn't tell you? Tsk, tsk, Amelia, keeping secrets never does anyone any good. What other lies have you told? You think everyone in your life is just going to accept you without any questions?"

"Mia? What's she talking about?" Peter threw an uncertain glance at me over his shoulder.

My mind was spinning in circles. Heart pounding, trapped in a panic. I couldn't think, I couldn't speak. All I could see where the exits, all I could consider were escape plans. Open windows to the left, hallway to the right. Light fixtures, construction tools, various tarps to be used as improvised weapons if need be...

When I didn't say anything, Brandt said, "Oh, what's the matter, cat got your tongue? You should be careful, Peter. It's always the quiet ones you have to worry about. Never know when they —" she
flashed me a wicked look. "— might turn against you."

"H-how do you know my name?" Peter demanded, shoulders hunching. "How long have you been following us?"

"Oh, I've been keeping a close eye on Amelia ever since she escaped the Crucible, naughty girl," Brandt sighed, starting to pace back and forth. She stood in front of the way we came in. It wasn't the only exit, but it was the largest. "My boss is still very interested in his investments. Never likes to leave a project unfinished. Always has to see things through."

Her boss. Her boss. Who was he? Crucible? Ten Rings? Neither?

I wanted to run but I couldn't leave Peter behind. I was terrified. I was sure that, if I survived this encounter, I'd end up on the run again. Only this time it might be worse, because it'd be in my own country, and it'll be that much harder to hide in.

"And you're here now to, what, finish the job?" Peter demanded. His fists were clenched, he looked ready to fight. I almost wanted to laugh. Him? Fight? There was no way. He wouldn't stand a chance.

Brandt chuckled. "There's no job, kid, not where you're concerned. Neither of you know as much as you think you. Nah, I'm here because it's personal."

She took several strides closer to us. Peter and I retreated, but there was nowhere to go — my back hit the wall, so sudden it nearly knocked the breath of me. Startled, I glanced behind me, before remembering to keep my eyes on Brandt. She was only ten feet away now.

"Well, you're gonna have to get through me, first," Peter said, and I was surprised by how sure he sounded. His voice didn't tremble, his posture didn't waver. Like he meant it. Like he wasn't even afraid.

"You know what, I like you, kid," Brandt smirked. She still paced, making it so if either of us ran, she'd be ready. "So, I'll give you a chance to run. This issue doesn't concern you."

"Like hell it doesn't."

"Peter," I whispered, strained. "Don't."

What was he doing? Had he lost his mind? Fighting Brandt wasn't an option.

"Listen to her, Peter," Brandt said, and I hated myself for being so stupid. "She's been playing this game a lot longer than you. And she knows better than anyone that things tend to get pretty explosive when we don't get what we want."

We. That's right, she wasn't alone. There were more Extremis agents. But where were they?

"Now, how should I do this?" Brandt asked, holding up one finger and pointing between the two of us. "I'd like to just kill you and just get it over with, but that doesn't sound nearly as fun as killing him first and making you watch…"

Something clicked in my head, like a gun being loaded. All of a sudden, I wasn't scared anymore — no, now I was pissed. A wave of red-hot anger that cleansed the chaotic mess of terror in my head. All of a sudden, everything was clear. I knew exactly what to say now.

Finally, I managed to find my voice. "I'm sorry."
"For what?" She snorted. Brandt still seemed to be deciding on who she wanted to kill first, and seemed largely uninterested in what I had to say.

Well, that was going to change.

"For Los Angeles." I said, my voice low but steady. "For what happened to your friend. Sad thing. Hate it when people just can't control themselves, right?"

Brandt's smile faded. Her eyes narrowed, and she tilted her head. "It happens sometimes. No hard feelings."

Good, we were on the same page. I didn't want to name any names and accidentally clue Peter in on something he didn't know about. He was still unaware of Brandt's true nature, or that there were others like her. I'd tell him, if I could, if it didn't mean exposing me, too.

"Really?" I said, and I could feel Peter giving me a what-the-hell-are-you-doing look, but I was too focused on Brandt to give him any sort of response. "That's funny. And here I thought that maybe your little cure wasn't all you hoped for. Does your boss know that it's unstable?"

Brandt's eyes flashed red. I'd pressed a nerve, and I knew I was right. Over the past few days I'd been watching the developing situation in the Los Angeles bombing case. I'd been working on a possible theory as to how Vint might have lost control, why he would've blown up the square if he wasn't given orders. I didn't think I'd ever get a chance to confirm it.

But Brandt, in all her wisdom, in her grand scheme to get revenge, had given me the exact answer I was looking for.

I wondered if she might actually attack then. But Brandt inhaled, and her eyes returned to their normal green. "I heard they were still investigating. Random bombing. No political motivations. Wasn't a terrorist."

"Who said anything about terrorists?"

Brandt stopped pacing. Faced me. Her eyes were filled with war.

Peter took a step back, cautious. At the same time, I took a step forward, ready to engage; we stumbled into each other, exchanged looks.

Although Brandt didn't move, her hackles were rising. I'd definitely pressed a few buttons. She sneered, "Clever little soldier, thinks she's got everything all figured out. I guess you haven't left us behind after all. One foot in either world, right? Well, sooner or later, it's going to tear you apart."

"And here I was thinking, you weren't g-going to let me leave this place alive." I taunted.

When Brandt lunged, I was ready.

There were times I wondered what it was like to be Pietro, to be constantly seeing the world in slow-motion. The reason why he was so jittery and excitable all the time — it wasn't that he was thinking more than the rest of us, just experiencing the same thoughts and waiting for us to catch up.

I had been experiencing that all day, constantly feeling like I was out of step with everyone else. Until now.

Now, everything was exactly the right speed. The moment before Brandt attacked, I saw the build-up in minute detail, frame by frame. Her lips drawing back, teeth baring. Her weight shifting to the
balls of her feet, knees bending, hands raising, glowing veins snaking down her fingers.

Then I reacted.

I slammed both hands into Peter's back, shoving him to the left and out of the way. I had just enough
time to bring up my arms to defend myself when Brandt landed on me.

Impact threw me off balance. Burning hands clamped down on my arms.

Brandt had missed Peter, so her hands grabbed my arms. She was probably going for my neck, but I
was protecting my face.

We slammed into the wall behind me. Sheetrock gave way under my back and we fell through. With
a loud crash we landed into the room on the other side — for a split second I was terrified of falling
onto exposed rebar and getting impaled, but the floor was solid beneath me.

The acrid stench of smoke filled the air as Brandt's hands started burning through my sleeves. I could
feel the heat already, not quite singing my skin. There was no time to fuss about this. Brandt had me
pinned to the floor. The worst position I could be in.

As she tried to pull my arms apart in an attempt to get at my face or chest, I rolled back on my
shoulders, bucked my hips with all the force I could muster. Brandt went flying past my head, landed
with a grunt.

I rolled over, got to my knees. Didn't have time to get up. Brandt was already back on her feet,
whirling around.

She swung her leg. Booted heel came for my face. Gasping, I threw myself backwards on my
haunches, falling back on my elbows before she could puncture my cheek.

I didn't see the follow-up kick coming from the other direction. I didn't even see the back of her heel,
just felt the impact when it struck my temple.

Stars in my eyes. I went down.

"Hey, Hot Stuff!" I heard Peter shout somewhere behind me. "Catch!"

Thwip!

My vision returned to me just in time to see Brandt take a flying wrench to the face.

The thing had some serious velocity on it. Brandt, who'd been standing right over me, let out a cry
— her head snapped back, knocked straight off her feet. Fell to a heap nearly six feet away.

The wrench, having bounced off her chin, ricocheted wildly, striking directly into a fuse box. Sparks
flew and the wrench started to spasm, white arcs of electricity flashing along its body.

I scrambled to my feet, out of breath. Turned around. Peter was standing, slightly hunched, in the
improvised doorway that had been made when Brandt tackled me. His face was pale, eyes wide,
fixed on Brandt.

"Nice," I said.

Peter flashed me a weak smile of appreciation.

Brandt was clearly dazed by the blow. As she stood up, Peter jolted at the sight of her dislocated jaw,
set askew from her face, nearly separated from her head entirely. Yet, as we watched, her skin charred, turned back, before starting to glow and yank itself back together. By the time Brandt had stood up again, her face had healed.

We stumbled back as Brandt cracked her neck, stepped towards us. What was it going to take to finally put her down?

The fuse box crackled and fizzed. The lights above us flashed wildly. A lightbulb popped, made me flinch.

For a moment all the lights went on with blinding brightness. For a moment, I couldn't see anything.

When the lights died again, I jumped.

Brandt was gone.

Seconds later, I knew why.

Pounding feet echoing through the building. Shouts, radio crackle, guns being drawn. Peter and I shared a baffled look before turning around to face the envoy of men and women in suits and blue bullet-proof vests came storming into the room.

The FBI had arrived.

✮✮✮

Agent Burke stood over us, arms crossed.

"So, you're telling me she just... left?" He asked, looking skeptical. "Despite the fact that she was trying to kill you a second before, is what you're saying?"

I shrugged, my eyes falling past him to the line of cop cars and vans marking the perimeter around the construction zone. Peter and I had been sitting next to each other on the sidewalk for the past half hour while the FBI cleared the area, looking for Brandt. They hadn't found her inside the building, and had moved on to the surrounding streets.

I didn't see the point in telling them they'd never catch her.

"She knew you were coming," I said, my voice dull. The fight had given my anxiety from the past few days some validity, but now that it was over, I just felt dead inside. Brandt was relentless. Not even three days of being free and she had already attempted retaliation. The fact that I was still alive was lucky. "So, she got out while she still could."

Burke didn't looked pleased with this information. He ran a hand over his face, looked over the street, as if some answer might make itself available to him. When it didn't, he turned back to us. "And you decided that engaging her would be a good idea?"

"Hey, she attacked us first!" Peter snapped before I could reply. When Burke fixed him with an unflinching glare, Peter hesitated, before bowing his head and withdrawing. "But we should've called for help."

"There wasn't time," I said, frowning. Sure, calling for help is never a bad idea, but it's hard to think
rationally when you're in the moment, about to have your face burned off.

"There would have been, had you not run and went into a place you're not supposed to be," Burke replied, planting his hands on his hips. "What in the world made you think that a construction zone of all places was the safest place to be, Amelia? Why didn't you run into a store or shop, so people could see you? From the looks of it, Brandt was aiming to trap you away from reach — it's unlikely she would've approached you in public."

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. I couldn't explain it to him. The isolation, the uncertain floorplan, available tools, the many exits... again, not rational. And I couldn't be sure about the latter part of his argument — Maybe Brandt would hesitate before attacking me in full view of the entire city, but that wouldn't stop her from blowing up, would it?

Understanding I had no proper defense, that I had not been acting with a clear head, Burke sighed, hung his head. "I suppose this is my fault. My guys were unprepared. They shouldn't have lost visual contact."

"You mean the guys in the white van?" I asked.

Burke picked his head up, frowning. "Wait, you noticed —?"

"Why didn't you tell me?" I demanded, cutting him off. Maybe I wasn't in the place to be using that tone of voice on an FBI Special Agent, but my hands were shaking and I still remembered each terrified moment in vivid detail. "I didn't know that's what they were. Th-that's why I ran. I thought they were with Brandt."

Burke groaned, covering his face with one hand. I was starting to think he did that a lot. "Except I did, Amelia. When I first called you on Thanksgiving. You don't remember?"

"O-oh." I didn't. The shock came over me. I remembered him telling me about a protection detail but not much afterwards. "I dropped the phone. I-I don't..."

"And that if you saw us, you shouldn't acknowledge us unless you're in trouble," Burke went on. "In case Brandt is nearby and our position is given away. Which is apparently what happened today."

I hunched my shoulders, ducked my head in embarrassment. My voice was tiny. "I'm s-sorry."

Agent Burke just sighed. "It's fine. This was close, but to be honest we've had worse. And I have to take some of the blame here. I should've kept you updated. Both of you. For now, I'm calling your aunt, and sending you home."

"What about Brandt?" Peter asked.

"We're expanding our search perimeter to the entire island of Manhattan. Burke said, taking a deep breath. Maybe to give himself more confidence. "We'll catch her, don't worry. Least to say, she violated her terms of bail and won't be released again any time soon..."

"Only if you catch her first," I muttered to the ground.

Burke looked at me but didn't say anything. After a moment, he said, "Just hang tight, you two. I'll make sure the paramedics get to you, once they come through traffic. And, for the love of God, please do not run into any more abandoned buildings or start any fights until after we get Brandt, okay?"

We made noncommittal sounds of agreement, and Burke left us, muttering under his breath and
rubbing the back of his neck. I imagined it's going to be a long week for him. Maybe longer, depending on how well I could keep that promise.

The clouds were getting lower over the city. The wind, already cold, was starting to pick up. A storm was rolling in soon, and I vaguely hoped that we'd be home by then. But a part of me didn't mind if we ended up in freezing rain or snow — honestly, it wasn't like the day could get any worse.

We sat there silently as the FBI continued to operate around us. So many voices talking, flashing lights, constant chatter and noise. Past the cars and yellow tape marking the area were a crowd of gathering curious civilians. Since there wasn't any obvious danger or damage, it wasn't clear what had the FBI all riled up, and they were dispersed with relative ease. Most were just annoyed that they had to take the long way around to reach their destination.

"Mia," Peter's voice soft, worried, but it broke the silence like a bullhorn. "When Brandt said that thing about the quiet ones, about turning against me… was she talking about you?"

I stared at the sidewalk. At the black tires washing by in the slush. My hands were clenched together, fingers numb. Knee jogging up and down.

"Mia?" He prompted me, expression straining.

"She knows I'm a-afraid of her," I said at last, ducking my head and pressing my face into my hands. I wanted the black out the whole world. I didn't want to be here. The words were bitter on my tongue, but they had to be said. "She knows what goes on in my head. She thinks she can control me."

"...Can she?"

I lifted my head, met Peter's gaze. "Maybe once. But I won't let her, never again. She doesn't have the same power of me like she used to."

Peter frowned, taking this in with a nod. He didn't look as convinced as I hoped he would be. "You didn't tell me she had...those powers."

"Oh," I thought I had. Maybe it slipped my mind. Or maybe I only told the FBI. "Y-yeah. Most of them were like that."

"That's who you were running away from?" Peter asked, not that he needed an answer for that. "Jesus. I guess it's pretty lucky you had two Mutants on your side, right?"

I threw him a look out of the corner of my eye. "Hey, not so loud, okay? You're the only one who knows that."

"So, it's true, then? Wanda and Pietro, they're...the M-word?"

"Yeah. The Crucible was interested in those sorts of people. Not just the, er, M-word. Anyone with powers."

"But Brandt isn't one?"

"No. She wasn't born that way. They gave her powers."

Peter let out a low whistle, leaning back against the sidewalk, crossing his arms. "Well, that explains a lot. I just, I never really thought about it. When you said they were a cult, I just assumed they were a bunch of crazy guys in tinfoil hats. Not, you know —" He lowered to an undertone, hunching his
shoulders "— terrorists."

It sounded wild to me, too. "Yeah, I know. It was hard to explain what they are, exactly. Super powers, Communists, extremists..."

"And you think they're responsible for the attack in Los Angeles?"

I stiffened. "I never said that."

I didn't know why my knee-jerk reaction was to deny it. I had only brought it up to provoke Brandt — it was hard to do with Peter there, but clearly, I hadn't been successful in keeping him out of the loop.

"Brandt seemed to know what you were talking about," Peter fixed me with a doubtful look. "How long have you been looking into this? What made you think it was them?"

Shit. I couldn't think of how to talk myself out of this. "I-I don't know. Brandt and her guys...they have a reputation of blowing things up."

"And she knew the guy who did it?"

"Maybe." I said, shrugging half-heartedly. I didn't want to keep talking about this. I didn't want Peter to know how much I knew. I didn't want him to get involved. "She wasn't really clear. And there's been a bunch of attacks lately from the Ten Rings. She might've thought I was talking about them."

"But you weren't."

I had no response. I could only stare at the ground, wishing I could sink into and disappear forever.

"Well," Peter took a deep breath, and I looked up, surprised, when he said, "On the bright side, we're not dead. But can you do me one favor, though?"

"Uh, sure, what?" I said, wondering why Peter wasn't pursuing the matter. I decided not to question it, for my own sake.

"Next time, can you give me a warning before you pull an Usain Bolt?" Peter asked, wincing as he stretched out his leg. "I think I tore a muscle just trying to keep up with you."

I smiled despite myself. Somehow Peter still got me to laugh a little, even when I was like this. I just shook my head. "Sorry. I'll try to be more considerate the next time I panic."

"Much appreciated."

"So, where'd you find the wrench?" I asked, deciding now was as good a time as any to find out. I was having a hard time seeing how Peter, who couldn't hit the broad side of a barn with a wiffle bat, had managed to land a massive wrench on Brandt's head.

He shrugged, made a face. "Found it on the floor after you pushed me."

"That's weird, I didn't see it before."

"I mean, you were pretty freaked out, Goose," Peter said, his eyebrows shooting up as he scratched behind his ear. His eyes flicked away from mine. "You probably just didn't notice it..."

That wrench was bright red. If I could spot two plainclothes FBI agents, I'd be able to see a big-ass wrench lying in plain sight.
But Peter was right, too. I frowned to myself. I hadn't noticed any wrench when Brandt had us cornered in the room. I knew, because if I'd seen it, I would've used it. No, the room had been mostly finished — there were no tools left in there. So how had Peter gotten it, and so quickly? He'd only have had seconds to act.

Then I recalled the noise I'd heard a second before Brandt had taken the wrench to the face. What was it... *Thwip?* It was distinct. I could hear it clearly in my head, coming from behind me like Peter's voice, but I had no idea what had made the noise.

In the end, I wasn't sure. The unexplained, strange sound, Peter's resourcefulness, the suddenness of it all. The fight had begun and ended in less than twenty seconds. The fact I recalled so much at all was pretty impressive. "Well, I suppose…"

When Aunt May finally came to pick us up, Peter and I gave a very abbreviated version of what had happened. We decided to keep some critical details, such as Brandt's fiery abilities, out of the story, less it makes things worse.

As it was, we were pretty much grounded for the rest of our lives. Me for doing something so dangerous as breaking into a construction zone, and Peter for following me. For neither of us doing what Burke said we should have, what we were supposed to do, and get help. But I wasn't really bothered by it — grounded to the house for the next month? It wasn't like I had plans to do anything else.

And if there *was* something that would force me to break the rules, it would have to be life-threatening, and thus, a pretty good reason to break said rules.

When Ned found out, he wanted to come over immediately, but per the conditions of our grounding, Ned was denied visitation rights. We had to settle for a rather unintelligible phone conversation on speaker. Due to all his questions, it took us over two hours to go over the whole event, which in real life had lasted maybe ten minutes.

When I called Michelle about it, she thought it was "fucking wild, dude" which I found to be a pretty accurate description.

Surprisingly, I actually felt relaxed that evening at home. Somehow, I didn't expect Brandt to come knocking now that she had rendered herself persona non grata to the federal police. I wondered if her boss would be pissed about that — spending all that bail money just to end up with a wide-scale manhunt. Not exactly subtle. Or innocent-looking.

For once I actually managed to get some sleep.

Then, at 2:32 AM, my eyes snapped open, wide awake. I remembered where I'd heard that *thwip* sound before.

From when Spider-Man saved me from the bus. It was the sound of his web-shooters.
Part Six: Tick, Tick, Tick... - Chapter Forty-Four

Chapter Summary

[Part Six: Tick...Tick...Tick...]
Tensions start to rise as Mia finds herself drifting closer and closer into danger. With Brandt on the loose again, Mia suspects another attack may come soon. How are the Extremis mercenaries tied to the Ten Rings, and what role does Aldrich Killian play in all of this? As Mia and Peter dig deeper into this conspiracy, the Mandarin sets in motion his grand finale...

Chapter Notes

This is a new insert, from Peter's POV. The chapter that was originally here was pushed forward, along with the other following chapters. I decided to add this because we were missing last part's inclusion of Peter's chapter, as well as helping mark the spot of when Iron Man 3 starts. Part Six onwards takes place during that movie.

[Part Six: Tick, Tick,Tick...]

Chapter Forty-Four

✮

It had been three days since Brandt attacked Amelia, and Peter was on edge.

Something had changed that day. He could see it in the way Mia acted. She had gotten quieter again, like she had been when she first came home. Keeping to herself, muttering under her breath, casting
looks out of the corner of her eyes.

She was scared. And she didn't trust Peter.

"Wait, why are you here again?" Mr. Stark asked from his desk, peering at Peter over his sunglasses. His eyes were squinted painfully. It was unclear if he was just hungover, or didn't get enough sleep last night. "Something about your cousin?"

"She's been acting weird!" Peter said, pacing back and forth in front of Mr. Stark's desk. He was wearing his regular school clothes, although his mask was only a short way away, hidden in his backpack. "I think something happened when that woman caught us. Something she said to Mia, or maybe Mia saw something...I don't know, she's just not talking to me anymore."

"This same woman who played a big part in Mia's kidnapping, right?" Mr. Stark asked, and when Peter nodded, the man sighed, pulled his feet off the table, and settled his elbows down on his armrest. He fiddled with his sunglasses in his hands. "Look, kid, it sounds to be like your cousin's just...dealing with some things. Bad memories. This Brandt woman probably brought back a lot of things she doesn't want to remember. I'm sure it's not your fault."

"Then why won't she say anything?" Peter demanded, throwing out his arms. "I'm sorry, does she have to tell you everything?" Mr. Stark shot back, looking mildly affronted by Peter's tone. "Damn, kid, let the girl keep her secrets for a while. She'll tell you when she's ready. It's been what, a few weeks, after two years of trauma? I'm nearly six months out from the Incident and I'm still processing all that shit. I don't even want to be here anymore. I'm just here for a business meeting, then I'm out. So, I need you to stop busting in here for random pep talks."

"You're leaving me?" Peter said, and regretted it almost immediately. He sounded so whiny and entitled. *Jeez, get a hold of yourself, dude.*

Mr. Stark, likewise, thought this was a ridiculous question. He snorted, "It's the holidays, Parker, I got family, too. Besides, I hate the cold. I like my warm beaches. I like being far away, where I don't have to think about all of this. Everyone's hounding me on the Mandarin, I gotta figure out a way to deal with this mess..."

Mr. Stark's sentence ended in a yawn, and Peter tilted his head. "That's the third time you've done that. Are you getting a lot of sleep?"

He got an irritated look for his trouble. "What are you, my mother? My sleep is none of your business."

"Sorry." Peter said, ducking his head. "Are you really going to fight the Ten Rings?"

"That's what I've been doing for the past four years, haven't I?" Mr. Stark said, throwing up a hand. It flopped back down on the table, and his head dipped with exhaustion. "Don't worry about it, kid, the Mandarin's small-time. The President hasn't even called me in on this, or anyone else. The Mandarin acts scarier than he really is."

"Oh, okay," Peter said, frowning. He wasn't as sure as Tony Stark about this. "It's just that the news makes him out to be this big deal..."

"The Mandarin's just another scumbag hiding in a cave somewhere, thinking he's all-powerful because he has an internet connection and a lot of guns," Mr. Stark snapped, suddenly pinning Peter with a fierce look. "That bastard's going down, one way or another. He's done some evil shit, sure, but he doesn't have the cajones to even come near me. Trust me, I got it covered."
"Even his suicide bombers?" Peter asked skeptically.

Mr. Stark glowered at him, then pointed at the door. "Out, please. Our thirty-minute chat is up. You're doing good, kid, just stay out of trouble, okay?"

Peter sighed, resigned as he turned around. He couldn't exactly demand for more time now, could he? Not after he just blabbed for half-an-hour about his home problems to a bewildered scientist who had no context for his problems.

As he opened the door, Mr. Stark called behind him, "And stop coming in here! People might actually start thinking you're special or something."

Mr. Stark probably meant it literally — that Peter was getting the special treatment, particularly because he was Spider-Man. It wasn't an insult, but it sort of sounded like it, and Peter left Stark Tower feeling more alone and dejected than ever.

Amelia wasn't talking to him, and Tony Stark had no good advice. Peter couldn't tell anyone else, either. What was he going to do?

Something was going on — with everyone, it seemed. Mr. Stark was trying to figure out the Ten Rings, while apparently dealing with sleep problems. Amelia was scared witless by the return of her tormentors, and seemed to be avoiding Peter for some reason.

Ned didn't seem to know what was wrong, and Michelle was absolutely no help at all. The last time he tried to talk to her, she had showed him a page of her sketchbook. On it was a finely drawn hand, flipping him off.

But Peter did believe Mr. Stark. Why wouldn't he? The Mandarin had only attacked three targets so far. Nice, of course, as well as London, and somewhere in Eastern Europe. Nothing close to home. Nothing that could possibly threaten anyone here. To be honest, it hardly seemed like any of the Avengers were needed at all. Was this the threat everyone was really worried about?

Peter thought he knew.

Until he saw the Mandarin for himself.

It happened a week later, when he was watching *Seinfeld*.

He was home alone at the time, which in retrospect just made it all the more terrifying. May was at work. Amelia was at a tutoring session. Peter was on the couch, eating popcorn and kind of doing his homework, sort of, when the TV in front of him suddenly started cracking with static.

He got up to reach for the remote, when the screen flickered, the sound dialed down, and a grainy feed started to play on live television.

"*Some people call me a terrorist.*"

The voice was a deep, smooth baritone. A chilling version of an American accent. Images of a bearded man flashed across the screen. He wore dark shades and a long robe, vaguely resembling a monk. "*I consider myself a teacher.*"

The Mandarin.

Peter froze on the spot, eyes fixed on the TV.
Half a dozen men on their knees, hands behind their backs. Surrounded by guerrillas with guns. The shots varied, but Peter still flinched when the guns lowered, the shots fired, and the bodies fell.

"America." The Mandarin's voice was filled with contempt. "Ready for another lesson?"

Shots of children dressed as cowboys, grinning as they point their plastic guns at the camera. A sun rising over a prairie field. "In 1864, in Sand Creek, Colorado, the US military waited till the friendly Cheyenne braves had all gone on hunting." A close-up shot of the Mandarin, with his long black beard and dark glasses reflecting the spotlight overhead. "Waited to attack and slaughter families left behind, and claim their land."

He paced back and forth in front of the camera. "Thirty-nine hours ago, the Ali Al-Salem Air Base in Kuwait was attacked."

Then another shot, him without his sunglasses, staring directly into camera. "I-I-I did that. A quaint military church filled with wives and children, of course. The soldiers were out on maneuvers. The braves were away."

Light exploded above the US Capitol. A Presidential speech. A man, wrapped in an American flag, burned in effigy. "President Ellis. You continue to resist my attempts to educate you, sir. And now, you've missed me again."

The Mandarin with an AK-47, raising the burning effigy of President Ellis in the air, surrounded by cheering separatists. "You know who I am. You don't know where I am."

The Mandarin, looking directly at Peter. Through him. "And you'll never see me coming."


The screen went black.

Tinny laughter burst from the speakers, making Peter jump. Seinfeld was back on.

Peter realized he'd been standing in this half-crouched position for over a minute, and finally collapsed back on the chair. His body was trembling, pent-up energy and fear.

The Mandarin was going to attack the United States.

It was only a matter of when.
Chapter Forty-Five

It was getting dark early now.

A shock of cold hit as soon as Dmitri and I left the warm interior of the library. The sky was already black — the sun had set almost an hour ago, but it already seemed to be the middle of the night. I heard Dmitri curse under his breath and glanced over my shoulder.

"Sorry," he said, wincing. "I would not have kept us out so late if I knew how dark it had gotten."

"It’s all right," I said, offering a smile. It was just after six. "Time well spent. You passed your first test! I think our families will understand if we’re a bit late getting home."

"Are you still grounded?" He asked as we headed down the library’s steps towards the street.

"Oh yeah," I chuckled, shaking my head. Two weeks had gone by since the incident with Brandt. Aunt May was still pissed about it — Peter and I were home on the dot after school or work every day. No more weekend adventures (not that I had many to begin with). We weren’t allowed outside after dark. The tutoring sessions were the only exception I had, since they still pertained to school, and May wasn’t cruel enough to sabotage my attempt to stay in the Tenth Grade.

"It’s not changing anytime soon," I continued as we hit the street. "But as long as I’m with you, Aunt May figures I can’t get into any trouble."

I didn’t spot the usual nondescript van on the corner — a few days ago, Brandt had been spotted way down in Florida of all places, so the FBI had refocused their attempts on what they presumed to be her attempt to flee to Cuba. Thus, the protection detail had been reduced, and I’d been seeing less and less of them with each passing day.

Either that, or they were getting better at hiding themselves — highly unlikely.

"Ah, so I’m a positive influence?" Dmitri gave me a cheeky grin.

"Not if you keep bringing in food," I said, throwing him a side-eye. Dmitri had a habit of snacking when we studied, and so far, had been caught three times by a librarian eating where he wasn’t supposed to. "You’re gonna get us kicked out if you keep this up."

"I can’t help it! I’m a growing boy."

I just rolled my eyes. "God, you’re just like Peter."

Upon saying that, I immediately regretted it. The last thing I wanted to be thinking about was Peter right now.
Ever since the incident with Brandt, I was unable to reconcile the fact that Peter almost certainly had ties to Spider-Man. I wasn't sure how. I wasn't sure why. I had a theory, of course. And I was terrified of being right.

And so, I did the natural thing to do, and ignored the problem entirely.

I know, I know, not exactly the best thing to do. But what was I going to do, just ask Peter if he's really Spider-Man? Like his first instinct wouldn't be to lie, like all the other times? I didn't even have solid proof. I had the memory of a sound, and one random encounter with Spider-Man, whose voice didn't sound like Peter — at least, not that I could remember. If I decided to confront Peter on wild theories, based on conjecture, he'd just laugh. He'd probably think it was a joke. If he really was Spider-Man, he'd have no reason to tell me the truth.

I mean, aside from being my cousin and all, and the fact that we're supposed to trust each other, because we're best friends and known each other since forever. But, you know. Semantics.

I was also still trying to figure out the implication of it all. If Peter was Spider-Man this whole time, what did that say about the bus rescue? Did he save me on purpose? Had he been following me? How had he known?

But I knew the answer to that. Tony Stark had called Peter, given him reason to worry about me. And I'd given him my cell phone number. It wouldn't have been hard for him to track me if he wanted to.

It just made me curse under my breath. The more I thought about it, the more I was convinced Peter was Spider-Man. But he couldn't. He just couldn't be. Peter, tiny Puny Parker, who made dumb Star Wars jokes and retreated whenever Flash said something vaguely threatening, couldn't possibly be same person who went swinging around on custom-made web-shooters in a pajama-suit, saving people's lives like it was nobodies' business.

…Except Peter would totally do that, wouldn't he? He loved the Avengers. Tony Stark was his hero, ever since 2008, when Stark announced himself as Iron Man on live television.

Ugh. I wasn't making this any better.

Luckily, I had a mugger to distract me.

I didn't register him as a threat at first — I'd first spotted the strange man-shaped shadow lurking in an alleyway right before Dmitri and I crossed the street. This wasn't a completely unusual sight for me, but I should've been more careful when we walked right past that alleyway, and the shadow emerged, taking the shape of a large man, face covered by a black scarf. In his hand gleamed a knife.

He didn't move fast. Kept his arm to his side, so no one would see his weapon except for anyone in his direct vicinity. Trying to keep this subtle, quick.

There was a heaviness to his breath when the man demanded: "Money, now."

Dmitri yelped, startled. The both of us stumbled back, reaching for each other. My first instinct was to grab Dmitri's arm and put him behind me.

This seemed only to enrage the man. "Now! Or I start slitting throats!"

Somehow, I wasn't freaking out. Maybe the knife, only a few inches long, didn't impress me very much. Or I'd experienced so much violence in my life that I had become completely desensitized to threats like this. Either way, I didn't panic — only noted to myself that this guy must be pretty
desperate to pop out in the middle of the street, on a busy intersection in a not-bad part of town, just to mug a couple of dumb-looking kids.

"No," I said, my grip on Dmitri's arm tightening when I felt him reaching for his wallet. "Don't give him anything."

I was met with equal looks of shock. The man spluttered, "What, you think I'm joking, little girl? Hand it over, or your boyfriend gets to watch you bleed to death."

"Mia —" Dmitri hissed, panicked.

"I said," I repeated with gritted teeth. "No."

"Alright, bitch, you asked for it —" the man snarled, leveling his knife at my throat.

That was his first mistake. He wasn't going to make another one.

Bringing up my left arm, I knocked aside his arm, sidestepping and angling myself away from the blade. In one smooth motion, I grabbed his wrist with my right hand and slammed my other elbow down on his — then struck out my foot to his leg closest to mind. The man cried out as he was rendered to his knees, arm twisted at a painful angle. Finally, his fist slackened, and the knife clattered to the ground. I kicked it, sending the weapon skittering into the darkness.

When I let go, the man stumbled away from me, clutching his wounded shoulder. He gave me one last terrified look before turning and hightailing it out of there.

I got back to my feet, panting a little. Behind me, Dmitri swore in Russian. It made me jump — for a moment, I'd forgotten I wasn't alone.

I spun around, suddenly terrified of what that just looked like to him. "O-oh, jeez, I'm sorry, I hope I d-didn't scare you. It was kinda of, um, instinct."

"It's, ah, it's okay," Dmitri gave me a weak smile, but he looked a little pale under the streetlights. He scratched the back of his head, shrugged. "I guess you are a Fight person, when its fight-or-flight. Did I get the phrase right?"

I smiled, relieved. "Yeah, that's right."

I was about to say something else, but Dmitri pointed at me and exclaimed, "Oh, Mia! Your hand!"

"Mm? Oh." I looked down, startled to find my left hand bleeding. I must have cut myself on the knife without even realizing. As soon as I understood what I saw, a sharp jolt of pain went up my arm. I winced, "It's, uh, not as bad as it looks?"

Dmitri stepped closer, taking my hand in his to inspect the wound. I was glad it was dark to hide the sudden rise of heat in my cheeks as he carefully pulled back my sleeve. He muttered under his breath, "All my fault, never should have stayed out so late…Mia, I think you should go to a hospital."

"No!" I nearly shouted, and after earning a strange look, remembered to tone down my reaction. "Er, I mean, no… its not as bad as it looks, I swear."

I couldn't admit that hospitals still wigged me out, and just thinking about them instilled a strong negative reaction in me. And I really didn't want to make my grounding worse with this — I couldn't imagine how much trouble I'd be in when Aunt May found out I was in a hospital, and I'd have to
explain what I got myself into this time.

"But you can't just leave it like this," Dmitri protested, but there was no way I was going to a hospital. Trying to negotiate, he said, "At least let me help. I'm the reason you're here after all. My home is only a few minutes away. My mother will be home, but she'll understand, I think, after what happened."

I wasn't expecting the offer, and as unsure as I was, I was getting the feeling I wasn't leaving this situation without letting Dmitri help somehow. A guilty conscious was funny like that. "I don't know..."

"You'll be in trouble if you don't get this fixed, yes?" Dmitri asked, his eyebrows rising. "You're already grounded. I don't want you to end up worse because of me. Please, just let me help."

My blood was starting to drip on the sidewalk. I sighed, relented. "Okay, okay fine. But I can't stay for very long. I'll call May and let her know..."

✮✮✮

"Fair warning," Dmitri told me, on the elevator in his building. "My mother can be a little...much to people who don't know her. She is very quick to judge."

"It's fine," I said, absentminded. I was too busy taking in the location. The elevator was the fanciest thing I'd been in. It had a black marble floor with flawless mirrored walls. I tried to keep from dripping blood on anything. "How bad can she be?"

Dmitri's only response was a dry laugh devoid of any humor or optimism, but said nothing as the door opened. I frowned, watching him step out before following.

My boots made no sound on the plush carpeting in the hallway. There weren't a lot of doors here — just two, facing opposite each other at the end of the hall. The apartments took up nearly a whole floor by themselves, and I was starting to realize just how high-class this place was. I hadn't failed to notice the doorman who'd let us in, recognizing Dmitri on sight, even knowing his name and calling him, "Mr. Kasyanenko" with correct pronunciation. Or the fact that Dmitri needed a special key in the elevator to access this floor — the penthouse.

It was so bizarre. I had the distinct feeling I didn't belong here. My shoulders were stiff, and I forced myself to relax. Dmitri would notice if I started to look uncomfortable, and I didn't want him to think it was his fault.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. It had been doing that periodically ever since I called Aunt May thirty minutes ago. She was all right with me coming here — as far as she knew, we were studying under the supervision of Dmitri's mother. Considering the amount of texts she was sending me, though, I had the sense she was still worried.

When Dmitri opened the door, and I caught a faint whiff of nicotine. Was his mother a smoker? I didn't remember him ever mentioning it.

I didn't see who was on the other side until I heard their voice.

"Well, someone's late to the party." A man said.
I looked up and froze.

Aldrich Killian.

He stood in the center of the living room, directly in front of us. Blond hair slicked back, white suit standing out against the dark windows. A glass of whiskey in his hand. Other in his pocket. Casting the two of us a wry smile.

I didn't even notice the woman standing next to him until she said, "Dmitri, it's about time! I thought I told you to call me if you were going to be late."

Dmitri winced in apology, replied with something I didn't catch. I couldn't take my eyes off of Killian. My heart was thundering in my ears.

No way. This wasn't happening. How was he here? Why?

"And who's this? A friend of yours from school?" The woman asked. She was middle-aged, maybe around May's age, with graying red hair and a silk blouse that looked so soft. Not that I was really paying attention. Aldrich Killian was standing less than twenty feet away and he was watching us.

"No, Mum, this is the tutor I was telling you earlier." At that, he nudged me to respond. "This is Mia."

"Hi," I said, giving a tiny wave with my good hand. I only glanced at Dmitri's mother for a second before returning to Aldrich again.

"Is it okay if she stays?" Dmitri asked. I only vaguely remembered to hide my injured hand, being careful not to drip blood anywhere. The living room had a blush white carpet that would not do well against any stains.

"Yes, yes, it's fine," she replied, looking a little annoyed as she flicked her hand dismissively. "Just be quick, dinner is almost ready. I hope your friend doesn't mind staying for dinner. I'm sure Mr. Killian won't mind an extra guest?"

"Oh, sure! The more the merrier!" he replied with all the air and grace of a man who wasn't currently being stared down by a teenaged super soldier. He raised his glass in a small salute to me, a gesture of welcome; my first instinct was to run right back out the door. He turned back to Dmitri's mother and said, "And please, Diane, call me Aldrich. Mr. Killian was my father…"

I didn't realize Dmitri had said something until he nudged me, and I jolted.

"Mia? Did you hear me?" Dmitri tilted his head to the right. "The bathroom. It's this way."

"Oh, right," I said, pulling my eyes from Killian to Dmitri. Breathing uneven, I managed to plaster a smile on my face, pretend I hadn't just been staring.

Dmitri frowned, perhaps hearing the nervous tremble in my voice, but didn't say anything as he led the way down the hall, opposite direction of the living room. Trepidation grew with each step I took further away. I couldn't help but risk one last glance over my shoulder at him; Aldrich Killian had already turned his back on us, returning to the previous conversation at hand with Dmitri's mother.

The bathroom was right down the hall; I was maybe a little hasty in closing the door behind us. Maybe Dmitri's mother wouldn't appreciate it, but I liked the feeling of separation between me and Killian — I was trying my best not to freak out right now.
I was absolutely terrified. My hands had gone entirely numb, and when Dmitri gestured for me to sit on the counter, I couldn't think of anything to say. I merely sat, limp as a doll, as he inspected my hand, pulled out a first aid kit.

For a moment, I was utterly convinced that Killian was here because of me. That he knew I was coming, that he was waiting for me. But that couldn't be possible. The decision to come here had been spur-of-the-moment, triggered by an accident that could've been avoided had I been more careful.

No, no. This was all just one big, awful coincidence.

If Killian was in cahoots with the Crucible and the Ten Rings, then he'd know who I was. What I was. I couldn't help but relive the last few moments, me just standing on the threshold staring at Killian like an idiot. Had he recognized me? How much did he actually know about me? Of all my memories of the Crucible, Killian never featured in any of them. Maybe he was innocent. Or maybe I just hadn't remembered yet…

"Are you okay?" Dmitri asked in an undertone. His voice broke me out of my reverie.

I wasn't that comfortable in a completely new place — the bathroom had white marble countertops and a heated tile floor that I could feel through my socks. I shook my head, trying to collect my thoughts. Even if I was in the presence of a man who knew who I really was, I couldn't act like it. I had to be naïve. I had to pretend I was the normal teenager everyone else believed me to be.

"F-fine," I mumbled. I looked down at the cut slashing diagonally across my inner wrist and palm. It was a long one, but not very deep. More like a papercut — it had stained my sweater, but since the blood was still fresh it washed away quickly in cold water.

"I'm sorry about my mother. She's very insistent on, er, propriety," Dmitri said, dabbing an iodine swab over my cut. I was so wound-up that I didn't feel the sting. "I didn't know she would have guests tonight. It's all rather sudden, yes?"

"That's one way of putting it," I replied. I'd nearly gone into cardiac arrest just a few moments ago.

"I can talk to my mother, explain that you can't stay," Dmitri offered, then quickly backpedaled. "I-I mean, only if you want to leave. I'm sure it's a great inconvenience, and I don't want you to get home late…"

"No, I don't mind," I said quickly. "I'll stay."

It was only afterwards did I realize what I'd just said. I wondered if I'd lost my mind. What the hell was I doing? Aldrich Killian, a man with ties to terrorists, was standing in the very next room. I had to get as far away from him as possible.

…which was the same reason I had to stay. I could have dinner with Aldrich Killian, I could get more answers than what Brandt could give me. At the very least, I could try and determine if he was actually innocent or not. Maybe prove to Michelle, or myself, that I wasn't crazy for thinking what I did.

And if he was guilty? I couldn't just leave Dmitri and his family alone with this guy.

Dmitri, oblivious to all this, just flashed me a thankful grin. "Ah, wonderful! I have to admit, I'm relieved. I hate these guest dinners. They bore me, and I never have anyone to talk to."

I remembered him telling me that his mother was a famous reporter or something, so of course she'd
have home interviews with famous people. It had to be just my luck it happened to be Aldrich Killian today, of all days.

But I was glad it was with Dmitri. He felt like a safety buffer, in a way — I didn't have to keep all my attention on Killian, or at least pretend I wasn't. It would feel more natural to talk to Dmitri instead.

Dmitri finished wrapping my hand and wrist in gauze, and it wasn't until we left the bathroom did I realize something else.

Even if Killian knew who I was, he didn't know what I knew. He wouldn't know that I had pictures of him in Nice, that I had given an envelope to Agent Burke the day Brandt attacked me. He couldn't know that I was onto him.

It was like a game of Spy Vs Spy, only one of us didn't know we were playing. As we returned to the living room, I managed to level out my breathing again, get my heartrate down to a normal beat. There was a good chance that Killian was just a normal guy with bad luck. And I was going to keep an eye out for any signs that he wasn't.

Tucking my injured wrist up into my newly-cleaned sleeve, I followed Dmitri into the dining room, where the adults were waiting. The lighting was dimmer in here, with the long, floor-to-ceiling windows along one wall, and the main source of light coming from the chandelier hanging over the long mahogany table. At least I was pretty sure it was mahogany. It looked heavy.

In the back of my mind, I noted how sparse Dmitri's home was. It looked lived in, I'd spotted a bowl of fruit in the kitchen and dirty dishes in the sink. There had been a rack of shoes by the doorway, a coat slung over the back of the living room couch. But there were very few pictures anywhere. The place was almost devoid of any real color. Black, white, and brown seemed to dominate, fitting the modern, natural aesthetic of the furniture. Despite the smell of food and cooking, the air was slightly stale, as if the apartment didn't experience a lot of activity. The only true spots of color I noticed were my own shoes (a yellow that kind of clashed with everything here), and Aldrich Killian's blue shirt, and the green in Dmitri's hoodie. Diane herself blended in perfectly with her environment, her clothes in white or neutral colors; even the color of her hair seemed somewhat muted.

Maybe that was why I felt a little suffocated in here. Not just because I was in the presence of a possibly very dangerous man, but the fact that the apartment just didn't seem to welcome anyone here. Not even Dmitri looked particularly comfortable.

"Took you two long enough," Diane said as we finally entered. Both she and Killian were already seated at the table, but they hadn't begun eating yet (the meal appeared to be roast pork with garlic and mushrooms; I wondered if Diane had made it herself). She was frowning at me in particular, "Is something wrong with your hand?"

"N-no," I tucked it behind my back, which probably didn't make me look very innocent. I offered a smile against my nerves. "Just, um, cut myself today. It's fine."

Diane studied me for a moment, apparently unconvinced, but before she could ask any further questions, Aldrich Killian rose from his seat, adjusting his coat. "Well, I suppose I should introduce myself, seeing as I'm the unexpected arrival here."

From the look on Diane's face, I had a feeling it wasn't him that was unexpected here. I wondered if he was saying this because of the way I stared earlier. It was definitely a surprise to me.

Diane said, "Oh, you don't have to worry about that, they're just kids. I already told you about my
"Oh, it's not a problem at all." Killian said, giving Ms. Dawkins a neon white, million-dollar smile. Then he turned to me, offered his hand. "I wouldn't get very far if it weren't for the progressive ideas of the new generation. How else could I fund my business ventures? I'm Aldrich Killian —"

"CEO of Advanced Idea Mechanics," I finished automatically, having finally taken his hand. It had taken me a moment to acknowledge the situation, comprehend the gravity of this handshake. I almost didn't want to, but thought better of it.

Aldrich Killian actually laughed. "Well, someone's done her research. Personally, I prefer the term Creative Director but, you know, semantics."

"I r-read the TIME article on how you apparently s-saved the US government billions after their contract with Hammer Industries fell through," I said, taking my hand back. Remember, act normal, be normal. Then I added at the last moment, "And I'm, er, Mia, by the way."

Hammer Industries had tried to pick up the slack Tony Stark left when he pulled his business from weapons manufacturing. 'Falling through' had been the nice way of putting it; Hammer Industries pretty much imploded after the 2010 Stark Expo fiasco, in which their Iron-Man-Knock-Off drones started attacking the populace seemingly of their own will. The man responsible for the mess, Justin Hammer, was now in jail for the rest of his life.

AIM had quietly stepped in afterwards, offering various R&D services that saved Uncle Sam and kept any of the proverbial pie getting on their faces for helping fund Hammer Industries. As Michelle had told me weeks ago, AIM had been the Man's favorite partner for a good few years now.

"Well, Mia, it's nice to finally meet someone who knows what they're talking about," Killian said. I decided not to tell him that the only reason I knew this was because I'd been obsessed with him for the past few weeks. "You wouldn't believe the amount of suspicion and ignorance I get whenever I go out in public. Thankfully, your mother was kind enough to interview me for the Post, Dmitri."

Dmitri only gave a tight smile but said nothing. I was beside myself in relief; Killian didn't know who I was. He didn't recognize me. Still, as everyone sat down again, I was glad to have a spot opposite Killian, the furthest away with Dmitri next to his mother. I had a feeling she didn't like me much, either, so I didn't mind.

"So, Aldrich, I never thought to ask," Diane said to him. "How did you ever come up with the idea to start AIM? I heard you started it back in 2000, but why am I only hearing of it now?"

"It's just a matter of economy and ideas, really," Killian replied easily. Although the conversation wasn't directed at me, I still found myself listening intently. "At the time I couldn't find any big funding. The men I approached — well, let's just say they didn't have a lot of respect for a goofy-looking twenty-something guy with ratty hair and big glasses. It's tough to say, but business relies heavily on appearance and first impressions, and after a New Year's event in 1999, I realized I had to change myself before I could start changing the world."

"Changing the world?" Dmitri whispered to me out of the corner of his mouth. "Seems a bit full of himself."

I hid a smile behind my fork. "Well, he did help relief programs after Katrina. AIM is also the leading developer of GMO use in third world countries. They created a species of maize that's resistant to disease and needs less water to grow."
Dmitri threw me a strange look. "How do you know so much about AIM?"

"Dmitri, no Russian at the dinner table," Diane snapped without even looking at him; the both of us jumped in surprise. "It's rude."

I hadn't even noticed Dmitri had switched, or that I had responded in kind — it occurred to me that Diane might not speak Russian, and thus would be annoyed at the presence of a private conversation right in front of her. I wondered how often Dmitri did that, speak a different language to keep his mother out of it.

It wasn't like I could ask. As it was, I had other things to worry about. My face went warm when Aldrich Killian looked to us in interest. "You speak Russian, Dmitri?"

Dmitri seemed a little embarrassed, too, and ducked his head. His voice wasn't much more than a mumble when he said, "I was raised there."

I noticed he avoided his mother's gaze when he said that. Diane, likewise, sounded a little stiff. "His father is a banker."

"Ah," Aldrich said, nodding slowly as he glanced between them. Perhaps he sensed the unspoken tension, like me. He deftly switched tracks. Clearing his throat, Aldrich turned to me, "And where did you learn, Mia? I assume you're American."

I tried not to flinch. I absolutely did not want this conversation to be about me. Even worse, I paused a little too long, trying to come up with an answer that wouldn't give me away. "I, um, s-spent a year in Russia."

My heart skipped a beat, wondering if that was the wrong thing to say. Killian would know I was lying, if he knew anything about me. Or maybe I just gave myself away. The Crucible almost exclusively used Russian. If he'd been there, he'd know that. Could he connect me to it?

"Interesting!" Killian actually looked mildly impressed, and I didn't detect any odd reaction. Hm, maybe I was just overthinking this. "And Mia, I don't mean to be rude, but how long have you had that stutter? A nervous disposition?"

"I, uh," I blinked, surprised "No. I-I've had it since I was young. D-developmental disorder. Why?"

"Hmm, nothing. I think it's nice to see you're so confident with yourself despite it," Killian said. It was clearly a compliment, but there was something about it I didn't like, but I wasn't sure why. He continued, "I was like you, once. Back in my early years, before AIM. Had such a bad stutter I couldn't speak in public, always embarrassed myself in front of men better than myself. I used to hate it so much."

I frowned a little. "But you don't have it anymore."

"Oh, no, of course not!" Killian laughed, taking a sip of whiskey. "I trained myself out of it. Had to, if I wanted to survive. Part of my makeover I mentioned earlier. When I decided to become a completely different man, that had to go."

"Huh." I said, not really sure what to say to that. It struck me, though, in a strange way. I didn't know what Killian was really like before AIM, but I had an idea, and I imagined it was very different compared to the finely-composed man before me now. It must've taken him years to reach this point. A completely different man.

And I'd changed too, of course. But I hadn't lost my stutter. "Well, I-I don't think there's anything
wrong with it. No one seems to mind."

"Oh, of course, that's not what I meant," Killian replied, shaking his head with a smile. "I just mean, coming from someone with personal experience, that you're probably going to face a few challenges in the future because of it."

"I'm not afraid of challenge." I said, scowling.

Killian chuckled, which was surprisingly graceful of him considering I was being more difficult than I had to be. "Well, that's a good attitude to have. I hope it takes you far, Mia."

_Not far enough_, apparently, I thought to myself.

"So," Diane said, somewhat forcefully. She eyed me for a moment before casting a charming smile at Killian — apparently, I had been the center of attention longer than she liked. "Aldrich, tell me, what have you been working on recently? I'm sure there are a few upcoming projects in AIM that are sure to shake the foundations…"

Aldrich, successfully reeled in, replied easily, although I didn't catch it as Dmitri spoke to me in a low voice. "Are you sure you're okay?"

I threw him a funny look. He was speaking in Russian again (another private conversation from his mother?), but with Diane fully enraptured by Killian, she didn't notice. "Yeah, I'm fine. Why?"

"It's just," Dmitri pressed his lips together as he thought about his next words. "You just seem a little…tense? You haven't been eating very much."

"Oh," I looked down at my plate, finding that it was still mostly untouched, while his was nearly half-eaten. Interacting with Killian had distracted me from my appetite. To be honest, I wasn't sure I was even hungry at all. "Sorry. Guess I'm just not feeling it."

"It's fine," Dmitri said, smiling. "You don't have to eat if you're not hungry. I don't like pork very much, either."

"Ahem!" Diane's sharp tone cut through our conversation, and the both of us sat back under her warning look.

Killian didn't seem to notice, and he continued with what he had been saying earlier. "…so, this new thing I've been working on has actually been years in the process. It's been a dream of mine to be able to help veterans who've lost limbs in the war, or children who suffered due to sickness, and AIM has finally made a breakthrough in this new field of science. In 2002, I found this geneticist who was working on a formula that could regenerate lost cells. I'm sure you've heard about stem cell research, yes? Well, my project is along a similar vein — only the growing process doesn't take place in a lab, it happens in your own body."

The table had gone silent as we all listened to him explain. Killian was practically vibrating with excitement as he said, "It all starts in the head. When the brain detects pain, an injury within the body, it sends a signal to the area that needs repair. It tells the cells to duplicate, to heal and replace what was lost — to do this, they vibrate together, causing so much friction they heat up, and in less than a minute, a child who lost her foot in an accident can suddenly walk again. A soldier who lost his hand to an IED can write his own name. The entire field of medicine, completely revolutionized."

A chill went up my back. It wasn't just what he was describing, it was that I could visualize it, clearly, in my own head. In fact, I was pretty sure I'd seen it work in real life.
Extremis.

My blood went cold.

Aldrich Killian was in charge of Brandt.

Diane asked the same question I was going to. "How fascinating! And what are you calling it?"

"Well, now, Ms. Dawkins, that's top secret," Killian laughed, giving her a cheeky wink. "As much as I would love to have it revealed in your magazine, I'm afraid I have to wait for the press conference. Uncle Sam is very interested in this project and I can't do anything without their say-so, unfortunately. I, myself, am pretty impressed, though. The geneticist responsible for this miracle, Maya Hanson, originally thought this to be a malicious virus manipulated in the human genome. Turns out it only needed a little tweaking before it could prove to be useful."

I found myself reeling. Extremis was a virus? I was at once surprised, and yet found it totally logical. Of course, it was a virus. It wasn't meant to be in the body. That's why it went wrong. That's why it blew people up.

But Killian couldn't tell anyone that. Did he even know? He had to know. He was the reason people like Brandt existed. He must know what happened to Vint.

Then how did he not know about me? Maybe he was just a good actor, but so far, I was convinced Killian had no idea who I was, that I was the person Brandt was chasing after. Or maybe she just never told him. He'd told her not to start anything, right? Clearly, she'd disobeyed orders.

"Has it been tested yet?" I asked, then flinched. My voice sounded too loud, too obnoxious.

Killian blinked at me. "We had a few tests some years ago, a round of willing participants, amputees. The virus wasn't...completely successful, but we have had positive cases. Now we're just watching for any after effects. It takes a while. Sometimes it takes years for any negatives to show up. I want this thing to be full-proof when the FDA comes for approval. Then we can put it on the public market. Millions will be healed, millions will be saved."

It sounded like the most terrifying thing I'd ever heard. An entire army of Extremis soldiers. Millions of innocent people, turned into walking bombs.

And for what? What was Killian's end goal? Why did he have a team of personal mercenaries working with terrorists? What did he plan to do with the virus?

"That sounds..." I searched for a word. Any word. Anything that didn't give away my growing horror. "Incredible. W-will it help people who are sick, too? Like cancer, tuberculosis, stuff like that?"

"Hopefully, yes," Killian said. "The virus, as it were, will kill any alien bacteria in the body. It'll even attack genetic disorders. In the future, common cases like diabetes will become extinct. Children who were born too early, anyone with Lou Gehrig's disease, hemophilia, autoimmune disorders — all those people will have a second chance."

Which meant people like me — the small, the weak, the defenseless — would end up like I did. Wildly changed. Super powerful. Uncontrollable.

Killian was preying on them. If something like this had come along years ago, I had no doubt in my mind that I would've jumped at the chance to be healed. The Extremis virus would've been a miracle to me and my mother. So much of our money had been drained just trying to keep me alive, and
suddenly there was a perfect cure out there, that would take away all my problems?

Hundreds of thousands. Millions of people wouldn't think twice before they accepted Extremis.

It couldn't happen. It just couldn't happen.

I had nothing more to say. My thoughts had drawn me back into a reverie, thinking over the possibilities, trying to figure out Killian's ulterior motives. The greater disaster ahead. And the daunting, impossible task of how to stop it.

And yet I maintained composure. I reminded myself to eat, to at least get myself to do something. To pace myself. The only thing I wanted to do right now was find a solution to this mess, but there was no way I could do that now. I had to wait until I left, to collect my thoughts and come up with a plan of action.

So far, things were going well. I hadn't gotten too personal with Killian; at least nothing I considered personal. I hadn't even given him my last name. I was still stewing on what he said about his past, the fact that he had a stutter once, too — it was uncomfortable, thinking he had been anything like me. I couldn't imagine how Killian went from a dork, to selling weapons to terrorists. Could I ever do that, completely change myself so people would like me more? Would keeping my stutter hold me back in life?

I didn't want to think the world to be so cruel, but then again, I was held captive, tortured, and brainwashed for two years. Clearly, the world wasn't a very charitable place to people like me.

Absentminded, I slipped off my sweater. It was getting hot in here. Or maybe it was just me. I was eating dinner with the man who created Brandt, and I was starting to sweat a little. Talk about cells heating up wasn't helping, either. I wondered how he managed to control her. Killian seemed so normal; what did he do to earn her loyalty? Was Extremis all it took?

The Chairman's words echoed back to me. You can't buy that kind of loyalty. It's more valuable earned than bought.

I shuddered. Why was it that I had to remember him of all people, in a time like this?

A sharp intake of breath. I looked up, surprise. Diane had gasped, but I hadn't been following the conversation. I was doubly confused when I found her staring at me.

I didn't understand at first. Then I realized she wasn't staring at me, but at my shoulder. My left side was facing her.

She was looking at my tattoo.

I'd forgotten I'd worn a short-sleeved shirt beneath my sweater.

Well, if Diane Dawkins didn't like me before, she definitely didn't like me now. I didn't even have to ask — I could tell by now she was the type of person who looked down on deviant behavior, up to and including tattoos. Maybe it just never occurred to me before; Dmitri never gave me grief about it. In fact, I don't think he ever asked. But I could tell thoughts were stewing in Ms. Dawkins head, something that might come back to haunt me later.

But that wasn't the worst part.

The worst part was that Killian had noticed, too.
"Well, that's an interesting design."

His voice made me jump. Killian's tone was light, his eyebrows raised in mild curiosity. He had raised his glass to drink, but his hand had stopped half-way.

My hand went up to cover my shoulder, self-conscious. "Oh, um, thanks."

"What does it mean?"

"What?"

"What does it mean?" Aldrich Killian tilted his head slightly. "Everyone gets tattoos for a reason. Why that one?"

My heart skipped a beat, and a stroke of horror passed through me. I realized I had no answer. I never had an answer. The one time someone asked (Peter), I had told the truth. But I couldn't do that here.

"It's, um," I stumbled over the words, hesitant and yet speaking too fast. "A-a reminder."

"Of what?" Killian prompted.

Another second of silence before I replied, "A bad time in my life. I never thought I'd get through it…but I did. And now I have this, to remind myself that…that I can do it again, if I have to."

A normal person would probably say they just like stars and the color red. That it's for their favorite sports team. Or it's not done yet, and part of a bigger design. But I had never thought of it, I never figured I needed to. Most people in my life were aware of what happened to me; May, Ned, Michelle, they'd seen some of my scars. They didn't ask how I got those, either. I think they just all assumed they came from the same place, the same experience. And they'd be right.

So, I was completely unprepared. I only barely managed to recover by telling a half-truth. The tattoo was a reminder for me. As much as I loathed the Crucible, I had no desire to have the tattoo removed. I didn't want to forget what happened to me. I'd already forgotten so much. The more I remembered, the better off I'd be.

But it wasn't enough.

"Ah," Aldrich Killian nodded, appeased. "Well, if there's any reason to get a tattoo, I'd say that's a pretty good one, considering their permanent and all. How'd you get your parents to agree?"

"They didn't," I said curtly. I decided not to add they're dead, too.

"Oh, a rebel!" Killian laughed, clearly not expecting that answer. "That's funny, I didn't initially peg you for one when you first walked in, but I suppose appearances are deceiving, aren't they?"

"I suppose."

"And what is it your parents do, Mia?" Killian asked, and I could feel my skin prickling. Again, the focus seemed to be lingering too long on me. But I couldn't think of what else to do besides answer.

"My mom's a nurse." I said evenly. "And my dad's…a soldier. But I haven't seen him in a while."

Out of the corner of my eye, Dmitri turned his head to look at me. Ignoring him for the moment, I kept my gaze on Killian as he replied, "Oh, I see. I can imagine it being tough. But the war needs heroes."
I found that answer to be rather insensitive, even as someone pretending she had an actual father; but I took it to mean Killian bought my story, and I was relieved when Diane finally called his attention back. I sat back in my chair, shoulders slumping, then pulled my sweater back on. My heart was racing, my hands were cold. I rubbed them together to get some feeling back.

It only occurred to me later that no one is that curious about a tattoo. That the only reason Killian asked me so many questions was because he already knew. Because he was testing me.

And I failed.

I didn't know it until Diane asked a question. Something about who his heroes were, or what it took or something. I wasn't sure, because I'd only heard his answer.

Aldrich said, "To me, heroes are only forged when they're forced through the crucible of sacrifice."

My fork dropped with a loud clatter and I nearly choked on my food.

Killian looked at me, something flickering behind his genial expression. "Don't you agree, Mia?"

Our eyes met. I couldn't move. My mind was going a million miles an hour.

*He knew. He knew.*

*Shit shit shit —*

But my first instinct was to disagree. Only through the power of spite did I manage to recover quickly enough to say, "N-no, not really. I think being a hero is a choice. You have to make a choice to be better than others. B-better than yourself. Every single day."

Killian tilted his head, intrigued. "And you don't think that involved a bit a sacrifice?"

"Oh, it does," I said, nodding. I had finished my meal at this point — appetite left me a while ago, but I let my fork wander across the plate, pushing around vegetables, absentminded. "When you make a sacrifice, you're deciding that something or someone is more important than your own well-being. But n-no one can take that from you. It's not a sacrifice i-if it's not a choice."

Three pairs of eyes were watching me. Ms. Hawkins in particular was glaring daggers at me. But I didn't break my gaze from Killian's. He had gone very still — the hairs on the back of my neck stood on end. Had I gone too far?

Then Killian smiled. "Well, that answer sure got me beat. You won't put this in your piece, will you, Diane? I don't want the world to knowing I lost an argument to a little girl."

Diane laughed, looking relieved I'd stopped talking. "Oh, no, of course not…"

Killian made it sound light-hearted, but I wasn't convinced by his 'graceful loser' act. Calling me a little girl, really? Despite how scared I was deep down, I was actually a little annoyed. Who knew a man so powerful could be so salty?

What I knew for sure was that I had just made a new enemy. Or, perhaps, remembered an old one.

Aldrich Killian didn't acknowledge me again for the rest of the meal. At that point I'd completely lost my appetite, and asked to be excused. Not that I knew what I was going to do with myself in a place I didn't know very well, but thankfully I got the okay from Ms. Dawkins. She didn't even glance at me before dismissing me with a flick of her hand, as if I were a fly buzzing around her head.
I pushed back my chair, the sound of it grating against the floor going through my bones. I couldn't leave the table fast enough.

Get out get out get out get out

I'd left my phone in my coat, which was still by the doorway, so that was where I went first. The conversation turned muffled behind me as I put walls and doorways between me and Killian. Aside from them, the apartment was almost deathly quiet. I didn't even hear rumblings from other neighbors. It was like we were completely alone up here, hovering in some sort of empty void between time and space.

Having my phone back in my hands brought me a relief I didn't realize I was missing. There were several missed messages, most from Aunt May, one from Peter. No calls, so at least there wasn't an emergency I missed. As I started texting back, a hand fell on my shoulder.

"Sorry," I winced, shaking my head and grounding myself again. I was all nerves now. Killian knew who I was. I had to get out of here, pronto. "I'm just, I can't —"

"You have to leave, I know," Dmitri said, and as disappointed as he looked, he still smiled when he added, "I'm glad you stayed as long as you did."

"Me, too," I said, although I wasn't sure I meant it. I reached for my coat, quickly pulled it on. It'd be late by the time I got home, but for some reason getting in trouble with Aunt May didn't scare me anymore.

That's what priorities could do to a person.

As I picked up my bag, slung it over my shoulder, Dmitri said, "Thank you again, for helping me with studying. I wouldn't have passed that test without you."

"It's no problem," I said, and the words felt automatic, almost rehearsed. "I knew you'd do well. The next one's going to be a piece of cake, I'll bet."

I was just backing towards the door when a voice called from behind Dmitri. "Leaving already?"

The both of us turned around. Killian was leaning against the wall towards the dining room.

"It's past my bedtime," I said. My answer would've been lame, except the tone of my voice sounded more appropriate for the phrase 'go fuck yourself.'

Perhaps hearing the thinly-veiled hostility, Killian raised his eyebrows. "Well, I hope you enjoyed dinner, Mia. I myself found it rather informative."

"Really?" I said, feigning politeness. "I didn't learn anything I didn't already know."

Aldrich Killian studied me for a long moment. Then he huffed, smirking, and walked way.

Dmitri glanced between the two of us, utterly confused of what just went down. I was afraid something might have happened, not that Killian and I were on the same page, but he surprised me. Nothing happened. Nothing yet, at least. I wondered if he realized he'd made a mistake. I doubt he realized who I was at first, how much I'd heard before he figured me out. How much had he let slip? Was I any closer to his secret plan?
It sounded crazy to think he had one. This wasn't a James Bond movie, and he wasn't some mustache-twirling villain. But I was living in a world with superheroes. I lived in a world where aliens attacked, where terrorists could blow themselves up and come back again, where gods threatened to rule us all. Clearly, what I once thought was reality no longer applied.

But with Killian finally gone, I finally had the opportunity to slip out the door.

"Mia."

I stopped, glanced over my shoulder. Dmitri had followed me into the outside hallway, his brow drawn in concern. Did he know how freaked out I was? Did he have any clue as to my fear towards Killian? I was already scrambling for an excuse when he spoke.

"You lied to Killian," he said, catching me by surprise. "About your parents."

Unconsciously, I reached for my shoulder. The topic of my tattoo had gotten too personal, and I had let it. I'd been a complete idiot, and I forgot that I had told two different stories to two different people. An even worse mistake to make. Face heating up, I stammered, "I-I know. It's not what you —"

"It's okay," Dmitri said, holding up his hands before I could get any more worked up. "I understand. You didn't want to tell him."

"O-oh," I blinked, breath leaving my chest in a soft sigh. I hadn't expected that, either. I was afraid this might turn into a big fight. I hated misunderstandings, but they were bound to happen to me, with all my secrets and lies. So, I was more than a little glad that Dmitri wasn't making a big deal about it.

Something came over me then. I opened my mouth but words failed me. For a second, I didn't know what to do.

So I hugged him.

It was rather sudden — Dmitri made a noise of surprise, shifted back on one foot. To be honest, I hadn't really thought this through; I'd been overwhelmed by a strange combination of gratefulness and fear.

"Promise me you'll be careful," I whispered, squeezing my eyes shut. I had the distinct feeling that this might be the last I'd see of Dmitri. Ever.

"I — what?"

There was no way for me to explain myself. Not then. Not now. My voice was half-muffled as I pressed my face into his shoulder. "Just promise me."

"I-I promise," Dmitri said, finally relenting. He let out an uncertain laugh, "Although I don't how I'll do that without you there to protect me."

Realizing this hug had already lasted too long, I quickly withdrew. But at that point, Dmitri already had his arms around me, so when I stepped back, he caught my wrist (the good one). "Mia? Is there something wrong?"

I paused, before shaking my head. "No. Not yet, at least."

At his confused look, I added, "Just… don't worry if I disappear for a while, okay?"
"Are you going somewhere?" he frowned.

"I don't know. Maybe." It was the truth, at least. The future was uncertain. I had no idea what was going to happen next.

"But you'll come back, right?" Dmitri pressed.

I tried to smile, but ended up glancing away. "Yeah, of course I will."

I meant it to be true. But it sounded like a lie.
Little design/aesthetic thing based on the Crucible. Someone asked me why I chose that name in particular, so here's the answer lol

Chapter End Notes

I effing hate this chapter so much. I had to drag it, kicking and screaming, into existence. It’s way longer than I thought it’d be. It’s like giving birth and right in the middle finding out its twins instead ARRRGHGH
Something felt wrong when I got home.

I knew this before I even stepped inside the apartment. I had called Peter earlier, but he hadn't picked up. He could just be asleep, but my gut said otherwise — Aunt May, who stayed up waiting for me, appeared none the wiser.

"How'd it go, sweetie?" she asked from the kitchen, already in her bathrobe, ready to go to bed. It was past nine in the evening now; I had rushed to get home, but even the metro couldn't break the speed of sound.

"Fine," I said, grip tightening around the strap of my backpack. My first instinct was to kick off my shoes and shuck off my layers, but I couldn't. Not yet. "Is Peter still up?"

"He went to bed earlier tonight, why?"

"Nothin'." I mumbled, shaking my head. I was still reeling from having dinner with Aldrich Killian. Had the circumstances been normal, and I wasn't currently entertaining the theory that Peter was Spider-Man, I would've immediately gone to him to spill all, but now I was hesitant. Even still, I was unconvinced Peter was in the house at all. "Just wanted to ask him something. It can wait."

Aunt May frowned over her mug (hot chocolate from the smell). "Is something wrong, Mia? You sounded a little tense when you called me earlier."

"N-no, I'm fine," I lied, and I hated how my voice trembled at that. I was most definitely not fine. I was still uncertain with the way I had left Dmitri — my last words to him, the expression on his face, the fact that Aldrich Killian was still in his apartment. That's not to mention how I completely forgot about the mugging until now; an incident completely overshadowed by Killian's presence tonight. It hadn't even occurred to me to go to the police; I was just used to handling things myself. "Just a-a long day, is all."

"Hmm," Aunt May screwed up her lips, but it seemed sympathetic. She came over, ran a hand over my forehead, pushed my hair back. "Ah, your skin is freezing, Amelia! Aren't you cold?"

"Um, no?"

"Well, why don't you go take a bath?" May suggested, peering me up and down with greater concern. "At least warm yourself up. You're pale as a sheet."

I acquiesced silently, shuffling past towards my room to deposit my things. A bath sure sounded nice, but I wasn't sure I'd have the time for that tonight. On the way, I passed Peter's door, and paused. I listened for a moment, listening. Was he really in bed? Or was he lying again?

But my ears didn't pick up on anything. Dread coiling in my stomach, I raised my hand and gave a tentative knock on the door. "Peter?"
"Yeah?" came a mumbled reply.

I did a double-take, surprised. For some reason, I honestly expected him to be gone. Feeling embarrassed for that assumption, I slowly opened the door, peered in.

Peter was peering up from his bed, hair askew, and squinting at me in the dark of his room. "Is something wrong?"

"N-no," I admitted, looking down. Damn. Why did I feel so disappointed? For some reason, I wanted to catch him in the act of something wrong. "J-just wanted to make sure that you're okay, Maverick."

"Yeah. Why wouldn't I be?" Peter blinked in confusion (or maybe the hallway light was blinding him). He propped himself up on his elbows, frowning when I didn't answer. "Mia? Did something happen?"

"No," I lied, but then went back and said, "Well, I, um. I had dinner with Aldrich Killian tonight. It was…weird."

"Aldrich Killian? As in AIM Killian?" His eyebrows shot up. "Huh."

"What?"

"I don't know." Peter shrugged, rubbing his face with one groggy hand. He yawned. "It's just that Mr. Stark mentioned him at, uh, work today. Wait, how did you end up having dinner with him?"

"He was being interviewed. The kid I've been tutoring? His mom is a journalist."

"Did he say anything interesting?"

Aside from describing Extremis in all but name, and implying vague threats against my life? "Not really. It was kind of boring, actually. I left early."

"Seriously? A chance to talk to a guy as cool as Killian and you back out early?" Peter seemed astounded. He could only shake his head. "You've got weird priorities, Goose."

I scowled, a little put-out by the dismissal. But why should I be expecting support? I was deliberately downplaying the situation. "Yeah, well…he did say he was planning something big soon, so there's that. Night, Peter."

He was still frowning. "Night, Mia."

I closed the door and slipped into my room. It didn't matter that Peter was home or not. I still knew what I had to do.

Dumping my bag on the floor, I went for my desk, started scrounging around in my drawers. Found my binoculars, small enough to fit in my pocket. I pulled off my coat and grabbed my green canvas jacket, the one that had seen me through since Sokovia. I had a feeling I was going to need it now. Grabbed a wool hat, put it on, and tucked my hair in so it was hidden. A pair of fingerless gloves. A gray scarf pulled up over my nose.

I pulled my phone out of my pocket, studied it for a moment. Bringing it with me meant I'd have quick communication in case anything went bad. But anyone I told would be letting out a big secret, because I hadn't told anyone. And worse, if I brought it with me, that meant I could be traced. I wasn't going to make such a rookie mistake.
So, I left it behind on my desk.

Then I turned out the lights, sat cross-legged on my bed, and waited.

It took a good thirty minutes before I was sure everyone else had gone to bed. Aunt May went to her room shortly after I'd come back, and for a while I could hear the TV playing until she shut it off and tucked in for the night. Aunt May didn't seem too pushy on that bath, luckily for me. Peter was, apparently, already in bed, but I just wanted to make sure he wasn't going to try something either.

It seemed he wouldn't. An empty silence fell over the apartment as everyone went to bed. The only consistent noise was the pop and crackle of the radiator. I didn't catch any telltale noise of a window opening, of a disobedient teenager sneaking out at night after being grounded.

No, that role would be played by me tonight.

As soon as I was sure everyone had gone to sleep, I slipped off my bed, crept towards my window. My footsteps were light, and even in boots didn't make a sound across the floorboards. Carefully wedging my fingers beneath the window frame, I slowly hefted it upwards. The wood was old, and tended to squeak, especially in the cold. A burst of cold air entered the room as I inched it open.

I didn't push my luck, only opened it about a foot, just enough for me to squeeze out, before slowly sliding the pane closed again. The fire escape only made the softest clang beneath my feet. Loose snow, disturbed by my presence, rained down to the empty street below.

As I made my way down, I thanked my stars that my room had the fire escape, to make getting out easier. And then it occurred to me — Peter's room didn't have a fire escape. We were a good fifteen floors up. How did he ever get down?

But I was pretty sure I had the answer for that, too.

An hour later, I found myself hunkered down on the roof of an abandoned meat factory overlooking the East River. In the city that never sleeps, traffic and pedestrians passed beneath me, but that's not where my attention lied.

No, my binoculars were focused on the shipyard below.

About a half-mile away, the docks were quiet. A white yacht bobbed jauntily, its inner lights glimmering across the black water. But it was overshadowed by the huge cargo ship sitting right next to it, its solid metal form like a great sleeping giant. Although it was pitch black and there was no one else around, there were men hauling large boxes up the gangplank, a crane setting down large crates. On top of the cargo ship sat three helicopters. Men in orange vests and helmets were strapping them down, rolling boxes on trolleys towards them.

They were preparing the helicopters. I couldn't tell the make very well in the dark. The low-angled floodlights, however, revealed the helicopters were arms with wings on either side, empty hooks beneath them. Meant to hold something.

I frowned, dropping my binoculars. Were those military choppers?

I had found Killian's ship through the ever-helpful Internet. Apparently, someone got the scoop on his arrival in New York, and managed to get a picture of his yacht making berth on Manhattan. All it took was matching picture to location, and now I knew where Aldrich Killian was staying when he wasn't eating dinner with journalists and trying to terrorize teenage girls.

A fine layer of snow covered the entirety of the city. A sharp, bitter wind was picking up, cutting
straight through the thin canvas of my jacket, but I wouldn't have known it was cold until I noticed snowflakes drifting down. A calm, soft snowfall, muffling the noise, and leaving me to my thoughts.

What could I do? Sneak onboard? Play stowaway and see where Killian's ride took him? I had a feeling that he wasn't going to hang around the city for much longer. I'd have to decide, soon.

I'd have better luck hiding on the cargo ship. More space to hide, also less of a chance to run into anyone familiar (AKA Killian). But how would I get food? How well could I hide, and for how long? This was not a good plan. I had no supplies, no back-up, nothing. I was practically flying by the seat of my pants.

At the very least, though, I should get closer, see what was going on. Maybe get an idea of where Killian's ship was going.

I pulled my scarf over my nose, to hide the steam of my breath. Then, inhaling deeply, I stood up, and jumped off the factory roof.

It was a relatively short fall, maybe fifty feet maximum. The snow made for a softer cushion. I landed in a roll before coming back to a stand, then took off running for the shipyard.

I didn't go at a sprint — that might be too obvious. I darted between different cover positions as I got closer, peering out of dark shadows just as a few late-night workers passed, yawning and complaining about their hours. Security wasn't too tight around here, but there were more lights than I was comfortable with, and the last thing I wanted was to be seen charging over the chain-link fence like a demented monkey.

On the other side, I kept to a crouch, scrambling behind a stack of wooden crates. It was busy enough here that my footprints in the snow blended in with everyone else's, so I didn't have to keep looking behind me as I went. Instead, I could focus on what was ahead.

I continued to spy on the ship's activity. Most of the crates were unmarked, and those that were only gave vague descriptions: **STEEL, RUBBER, PETROL**, et cetera. Nothing that looked out of place in a shipyard, unfortunately. And I hadn't spotted anyone familiar. No Extremis agents. And no Aldrich Killian.

I frowned to myself, caught between disappointment and fear. I wanted to see him here, to confirm everything I knew; but I wondered, if he wasn't here, then what the hell was he doing? Was he still at Dmitri's? It was near midnight now. He couldn't stay there that long. It was just rude.

That's when I looked down at the crates I was hiding behind. On the ground nearest me, one of the crate's lids had slipped open, just a crack. It was wider than it was tall, maybe about a meter long, two feet deep. Bending down, I pushed it open.

"Holy shit." I breathed.

Inside were five missiles, each as big as my leg. Nestled in the thick straw, as if laid by a giant, angry steel chicken.

And painted on the sides? A single defining logo in white paint.

**Stark Industries.**

I reached out with trembling fingers, then drew back. I was afraid to touch them, as if they'd explode at the slightest provocation. My mind was going in circles. What the hell was Stark weaponry doing being loaded onto Killian's ship?
Then, in the distance, the rev of an engine. I looked up, tucking myself deeper into the shadows as a white Cadillac came rumbling through the gates, down to the pier. It parked itself only fifty feet away. I could make out its plates from here. I watched, huddled next to a quintet of massive death needles, as the car door opened, and out stepped Aldrich Killian.

He gazed about the yard with an air of quiet superiority, chin upraised. Steam billowed out of his nose, like simmering dragon's breath. The wind pulled at his pale suit, and he buttoned it closed, apparently not that much bothered by the cold.

His eyes scanned the area, and fell over my spot. I froze, breath catching in my throat. But Killian's eyes flicked past, apparently seeing nothing unusual.

Then he turned and headed up the gangplank onto the cargo ship.

I waited nearly ten minutes, wondering if Killian would appear again. If my cover was blown. When he didn't, I finally let out a sigh of relief.

"You know, it's illegal to trespass." A voice said behind me.

Only barely managing to suppress a yelp of surprise, I whirled around. Perched on a lamppost above me sat a shadowed figured. White eyes glimmered against the night sky.

He tilted his head. "And so is stalking. Well, it's not, but it is creepy."

Then, before I could think of anything to say, the shadow flicked his wrist. Something hit my chest, and just as I looked down to see a splash of white webbing across my jacket, I was suddenly lifted into the air like on a bungee cord.

I gasped, grabbed the web as I was suddenly hung up on the streetlamp — at the same time, the dark figure jumped down into the light. As I swung, legs kicking uselessly, he planted his hands on his hips and said, "Yeah, that'll about do it."

Spider-Man.

I tried to break free of the web, but it was stuck tight. Even worse, it was sticking to my hands, and I was struggling as I tried to pull them away again. This couldn't be happening. This couldn't be happening.

Spider-Man, in his home-made suit and welders-goggles, looked up at me, apparently amused. "It's no use! That stuffs got the tensile strength three times that of steel. My personal recipe, of course."

I had no idea how to respond to this ridiculous information. In my head, I was panicking. I was out in the open, hanging under a lamp like a spotlight. If anyone looked in this direction, I was utter toast. Burnt, burnt toast, after any Extremis agents were done with me.

That's when Spider-Man jumped up onto the crates. One quick motion, and he was standing fifteen feet from the ground.

It occurred to me that Spider-Man was superhuman. He had powers. Spider-web aside, he could leap farther and faster than any normal person. He lifted me with absolutely no problem.

The last time I faced someone stronger than me, it was the Winter Soldier. But it was clear Spider-Man was nothing like him.

Even better, he was now standing just a few feet away from me.
He glanced at me over his shoulder and said, "Hey, how about we give you an introduction before the police show up?"

*Shit shit shit shit*

Then, facing the cargo ship, he cupped his hands over his mouth and started to shout, "Hey, everyone, guess what — *ack!*"

He didn't get to finish his sentence before my legs wrapped around his neck.

It took a great swinging motion to get me over him, and as we swung back, Spider-Man's feet were wrenched off the platform. He gasped, hands going for my feet, trying to pull me off, but I had gravity on my side.

Spider-Man was panicking, apparently thinking I was trying to strangle him (I wasn't, but was annoyed enough to consider it). I just kept a tight enough vice with my legs to keep him from getting away. As Spider-Man struggled beneath me, I looked up at the rope of web keeping me suspended.

*Tensile strength, huh? Even the strongest materials had their weaknesses.*

I reached down for my boot, legs still wrapped around Spider-Man's neck. I pulled out a switchblade from my ankle and flicked open the blade.

Spider-Man let out a terrified squeak, and started to thrash harder. But the blade wasn't meant for him. Instead, I reached up, and with a quick slash, cut straight through the webbing.

We crashed to the ground in a heap. By the time anyone looking around to see what was going on, we had already disappeared behind some crates.

"*Idiot!*" I spat as soon as I recovered. We'd landed in a tangled mess, but I was on top so had the better deal. Spider-Man was struggling to get to his feet, but I tackled him, kept him pinned down with my arms crossed against his chest and neck. "You're going to give me away!"

"That's the idea!"

With that, he threw me off. Donkey kick, straight to the gut. Next thing I knew, I was on my back twenty feet away, completely dazed. Shit, he was strong.

But I rolled away just in time. Spider-Man's feet slammed down on the ground where I laid only seconds before. He only had a moment of surprise before I swept my leg and kicked his out from beneath him, brought him back to the ground with me again.

"You don't understand! It's Killian!" Once more, I grabbed him. My fists clenched into his shirt, furious, before I realized — the bus incident. The voice.

Peter.

"What did you just say?" Spider-Man demanded, voice cracking, alarmed.


Spider-Man scrambled back on his elbows. "No, not that! Th-the other name!"

I froze, speechless. Oh, shit. Had I actually said 'Peter' out loud?
He reacted faster, jumping to his feet in an instant. I did as well, struggling to keep up before he could get the advantage. Spider-Man lunged at me with a fist, clearly panicked, and I grabbed his wrist and cast him aside easily.

"Who are you?" Spider-Man demanded. Another punch. Another deflect. I had to keep backing up, moving fast because he was faster. "How do you know that name?"

"Because I know it's you, Peter!" I brought my arms up, crossed, to protect a blow to my face. The back of my legs hit something, right at my knees. I didn't see the follow-up kick to my chest, sending my flying over the low wall and down — wham — onto the deck of a boat.

Killian's boat.

"That's not my name!" I looked up just in time to see Spider-Man lunge after me. I lifted my legs, catching him right in the abdomen and kicking him off over my head.

"Yes, it is!" I called, rolling over and climbing back to my feet. Arms lowered, facing Spider-Man as he stuck to the side of a metal shipping container. He had the advantage up there, but I was done fighting. "I know it's you!"

"You don't know anything about me!" Spider-Man replied, and when I stepped forward, he stuck out his arm and suddenly my foot was stuck to the dock, covered in web. I grunted, unable to pull it out. "You're one of them, aren't you? The ones who blow up towns and kidnap innocent kids? For your secret cult?"

"No, that's not what I am!" Giving up, I just lifted my head and shouted, "I know all about you, Peter, because you know me, too!"

Without waiting for him to question further, or possibly attack me again, I ripped off the hood and scarf. A nearby lamp had my face perfectly lit — I knew Peter wouldn't be able to mistake my face. I brushed my hair out of my face, just to be sure. Spider-Man still hadn't moved. His eyes seemed fixated on mine. "It's me. It's Mia. Peter, I'm not one of them, I swear."

It clearly stunned him; as I bent down to cut my foot free, Spider-Man seemed to have lost his strange grip on the container; he slipped to the ground, arms slack, shoulders hunched. He was breathing hard now, shaking his head. "No, what? No. You're not — I-I don't know you."

He sounded dazed. In denial. He knew. He had to.

"I know it's you, Peter!" I said earnestly, slowly coming to a rise. I stepped forward, but Spider-Man retreated. All at once, the tables had been turned. I was on the advance now. It was him that was scared. "You think I don't recognize you? I've known your voice since we were practically babies."

"No, no, you don't know what you're talking about." Spider-Man was still shaking his head, but his hands were over his face. It was like he didn't want to look at me. Couldn't accept it. He'd even switched back to that growling voice, a half-hearted attempt at his old façade. "I'm not some dumb kid you know. I'm Spider-Man!"

"Will you cut it out already?" I snapped, finally losing patience. "That's just your Clint Eastwood impression! I know it's you!"

"Mia!" With an angry rush, Spider-Man ripped off his mask.

When Peter's face appeared under the light, with his mussy hair and furious dark eyes, I was
rendered speechless. Somehow, I was stunned Spider-Man was Peter. Maybe I just hadn't fully accepted it until now.

It was Peter who was glaring at me, eyes wide, expression filled with utter dismay, mask clutched to his chest. "What the hell! What are you doing here?"

His voice was a hushed yell, like a stage whisper. But I was still reeling. I just stared at him, agape. I could only blink, shake my head. "...it's you, it's really you..."

"Yeah, you just said it was me!" Peter said, throwing his arms up. His fingers were like claws, and I could see he was starting to really freak out. "What are you — how did you even — with the knife and the — you've been spying on Killian? And you know about the Ten Rings? How did you even throw me —"

"I-I'm sorry, I'm sorry," my breath was starting to pick up, too, and I realized I had a much greater emotional response to this than I realized. A strange lump had formed in my throat, and it took me a second to speak past it. "I-I just...I hoped I wasn't right. I hoped it wasn't you..."

"What-what do you mean?" Peter just threw me a bewildered look. Now he seemed to have overcome his previous denial, and approached me. His hackles dropped, and for a moment, his anger faded. "Mia, are you okay?"

I stared at him for a long moment. There were so many things I wanted to tell him at that moment. Here we were, two teenage kids, standing on a boat we weren't supposed to be one, dressed in ridiculous clothes (one more than the other), panting and staring at each other like we just discovered the invention of fire for the first time.

Then I said, "Put your mask on."

"What? Why?" Peter frowned at me.

"Just put it back on!" I said in a whisper, grabbing his shoulders. "Were'n't you listening? We're on Killian's ship! If he sees you —"

Peter had just pulled his mask back on when something popped. The both of us jumped in surprise.

"Well, well, well," a low voice drawled, a deep chuckle at our fright.

Peter and I whirled around. On the deck above, watching over us with a smirk on his face, was Savin. In his hand, he held a zippo lighter, which he snapped open and shut.

His eyes glimmered red in the darkness. "Looks like I caught myself couple of stowaways. Lucky me."
Rebel Columbia, as inspired by Wonder Woman (from a lovely review I got, who said in their head RC’s outfit looked similar to WW’s)

I made two versions b/c and i don't know which one i like more lol

ALSOOO I want to say thank you to Naiadoodle for the cute imagine/drawing she did of Amelia, Bucky and Brandt based on a comment in the last chapter. It gave me a good laugh ^_^
Chapter Forty-Seven

Chapter Summary

The Kids Aren't Alright | The Offspring
https://open.spotify.com/track/4EchqUKQ3qAQquRNKmeIpnf

Chapter Notes

THIS IS NOT A NEW CHAPTER - i added a new insert where ch. 44 [Part Six] is. It's from Peter's POV. Read it if you like :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Forty-Seven

"Mia, Mia, Mia," Savin sighed, shaking his head in disappointment. "I thought you were smarter than this. You had an out that we so generously provided. You could've gotten away from all of this. And here you are, running back like some lovesick puppy. You know, if I didn't know any better, I'd say you missed us!"

Peter threw me a wide-eyed look. "Wait, you know this guy?"

I didn't have the time to answer him. Instead, I kicked him in the chest. "Look out!"

There might've been a better way to have moved Peter, but you don't have a lot of time to think things through when you're about to be blasted by a fireball. It came down just as I knocked Peter out of the way — the blast sent us flying, heat searing through the cold air.

I landed hard on my back. Breathless, I lifted up my head, just in time to see Savin land on the deck in front of me.

Soft wind from the river washed over me, and I was distinctly aware of how exposed my face was.

My heart skipped a beat. No, no this wasn't supposed to happen. Bad enough I got into an unplanned fight (as if there are any other kind), but now Savin was alive? I couldn't do this, not now.

Scrambling back to my feet, I turned and ran.

I made for the dock. It was less than ten feet away.

Someone stepped out behind the wall of crates, directly in front of me. A dark-haired woman, an Extremis.
I tried skidding to a stop, but was going too fast.

The woman cackled as I ran right into her. She had a grip on my arms in an instant. I gasped, struggled to get away, but she already had a lock on my throat. I tried to shake her off, but she had a better stance.

And there was nowhere for me to go. Extremis behind, Savin in front, crates on either side.

"Aw, leaving so soon?" Savin called out. I grimaced as the woman twisted me around to face him. Already her skin was getting hot.

A trap a trap a trap a trap my mind ran in circles.

"I-I thought you were dead." I managed to say, still struggling as he approached.

Savin shrugged nonchalantly as he meandered over, taking his time, enjoying the moment. "Oh, you know. Spent a few days suffocating beneath ten feet of snow, got a little frostbite, had to grow some fingers back. Personally, I'm a little surprised myself. Can't believe I'd ever see you again. What, was your normal little life too boring?"

I grit my teeth. The woman — whose name I vaguely remembered as Cortes — had a tight pressure around my neck. Not necessarily choking me (although she wasn't exactly being delicate, either), but making me feel light-headed. Cutting off circulation to my brain. I'd be unconscious in under a minute.

I didn't want to think about what would happen next.

"You can't kill me," I choked, wrenching around in Cortes' grip. "They'll know it was you. They know you're still after me."

"And yet," Savin looked around, held out his hands. "Here you are, walking right onto our ship. Can we help it if we're doing our jobs, protecting dangerous materials from a possible thief? I think the authorities would understand. You see, the key to staying alive, Mia, is not looking for trouble."

He was interrupted by a shout.

"Timber!"

Savin spun around, surprised. All three of us looked up to see a tower of crates come crashing down.

Cortes cried out, letting me go instantly in her attempt to escape. I hit the ground hard. Without even pausing to think, I rolled hard to the left, barely avoiding getting crushed beneath the wreckage.

Throat raw, breath stinging, I stumbled back to my feet. Above me, crouched on top of some crates, was Spider-Man.

Cortes was groaning under a pile of broken wood and straw. Her legs had been caught beneath, but she was starting to pull herself out. She lifted one hand, only for a loud Thwip! To go off, and a skein of web slapped her hand back down on the deck, cementing it there. Two more appeared, catching her other hand and shoulder. Cortes let out a grunt, frustrated when she couldn't break free.

I didn't even see that Savin had escaped until Spider-Man dropped down right on top of him, knocking the larger man to the ground.

"Wow, you talk even more than I do," Spider-Man said, mildly impressed. He turned to me. "I'm
Sorry, ma'am, is this guy bothering you?"

I glared at him, half furious, half aghast. Did he think this was funny? "What the hell are you doing?"

"Huh?" Spider-Man seemed to have underestimated who we were dealing with. Before he could move off of Savin, Spider-Man let out a yelp. Savin wrapped a burning hand around Spider-Man's ankle, and with one good jerk, threw him off.

Spider-Man bounced across the desk, bouncing off some crates. I ran for him, helping him back up, as Savin said, "I don't know what impressed me more; that there seems to be a freak in every city, or the fact that you always manage to find them, Mia."

"He's one to talk," Spider-Man muttered, hopping on one foot he got back to his feet. His other ankle was singing badly, although I couldn't see any exposed skin.

I had a hold of his elbow, keeping him supported and placing myself between him and Savin. In an undertone to Peter, I said, "Listen to me, we have to get out of here. Don't try to fight these guys, there's too many of them."

"What are you talking about?" Spider-Man threw me a look. "There's only two of them."

"I assure you, there's more." I said darkly. "They're like rats."

And sure enough, as I spoke, there came a thundering of footsteps. Behind us, half a dozen more Extremis men and women arrived, alerted from somewhere within the ship. On the other end, Cortes was joining Savin, having burned off the rest of the web that had held her down.

Before I could even come up with a plan, Spider-Man put a hand on my shoulder. "Hey! Go! I'll distract them!"

"What?"

"Just run!"

I didn't argue. Instead, I spun on my heel.

At the same time, all the Extremis men charged.

I just caught a glimpse of Spider-Man leaping into the air before I took off. I initially headed for Savin and Cortes, since there were only two of them. They tensed, rushing for me, but I feinted left, slipping through an aisle between crates.

I leaped ahead, taking a burst of speed as the others attempted to turn around.

Above me, I heard whooping. As I raced through the maze of crates, I looked up, and saw Spider-Man swinging back and forth through the air, firing off shots of web and kicking over the tops of crates as he swooped past. He skipped off the side of the main mast, spinning from his web like an acrobat in a circus. For a moment, I was in awe. Was that really Peter? Could Peter Parker really be that graceful?

He was too high and too fast for any of the Extremis to catch, and I could feel their rising frustration at being debilitated by such an annoying presence.

The crates cast long shadows beneath the floodlights, and against the night sky I felt like I was practically running blind. I no longer had a visual of the docks anymore, and I prayed I was heading
in the right direction.

I didn't know who was behind me, but whoever it was, they were hot on my heels (pun not intended). I just ran faster, all the while thinking to myself how stupid it was to come here. Who did I think I was, Nancy Drew? What did I expect was going to happen, going straight to Killian's base of operations?

Even worse, now Peter was involved. I heard a laugh overhead as he managed to juke someone. Well, at least one of us is enjoying ourselves.

Then it appeared. The end of the deck. A way off. Almost there!

I had just started to smile when Cortes tackled me.

She appeared, seemingly out of nowhere, from my right. She had been hidden by the ship's machinery — had Cortes been waiting for me?

It didn't matter. One second, I was on my feet, the next I was on my back, Cortes on top of me. She was shorter than me, but stockier, and a good thirty pounds heavier. It may not seem like a lot, especially to someone with super strength, but I was definitely feeling that weight on my chest as she tried to pin me down.

I tried to grab her and throw her off, but Cortes only used my own arms against me, bending my arms back and locking them just under my chin. I tried to shake her off, but my biceps were screaming. No no no, c'mon, do something —!

Just as her hands were getting hot, I bucked my hips as hard as I could, lifting up one leg and pushing it against hers, at the same time shifting up on my right side.

Cortes, unbalanced, tumbled off to my left, and I scrambled away, arms free and aching.

But I didn't get far.

She grabbed my ankle, dragged me back. I kicked her in the face, grabbed the railing to help pull myself away. But Cortes dragged herself along with me, and was up at the same time.

I dodged her first blow, but took the next fist in the side, just below the ribcage. It didn't wind me, but had me bent over long enough for her to grab a hold of my hair in one hand and threw me, headlong, through a closed doorway.

The door burst inward upon impact. I cried out as I careened down a flight of steps on the other side, tumbling head over heels into the belly of the ship. I face planted into wall at the bottom, which luckily meant I was still on my feet, and managed to scramble away before Cortes could catch up.

Head rattled, I tasted blood in my mouth from where I'd bit my tongue upon falling.

The ship's corridor was narrow, and I found myself bouncing off either wall as I started tearing down to my right, hoping to find another exit. The last thing I wanted was to get stuck in tight quarters like this with someone very hot and very explosive.

Leaping over pipes and ducking under low overhangs, I darted past a dozen rooms, some with people in them. None I got a good look at — at my speed, everything was just a blur. I could only hear vague, echoey shouting over the thundering heartbeat in my ears.

One man, perhaps hearing the commotion, stepped out into the corridor in front of me. He was
looking in the wrong direction. I weaved around him, pushing him behind me and directly in Cortes’ way. A shout and bang behind me let me know when he got flattened by the frustrated Extremis mercenary.

The air down here was stale and a little humid. I went through a doorway and spun around, slamming it shut behind me before continuing forward. I heard an angry shout as Cortes slammed into it, taking a second to blast through before following.

Cortes, thankfully, wasn't as fast as I was, and I managed to outpace her for a good thirty meters, before I found another staircase leading up.

I had just made my way up the first few steps when a shadow appeared in the doorway above.

Savin.

I came to an abrupt stop on the staircase, hand on the railing. Blood pounding, breath heaving. Cortes' footsteps catching up behind me.

"Surprise," he grinned.

I scowled, then turned around, throwing up my heel. I caught a glimpse of Cortes' face at the threshold below, right before I kicked the heavy metal door in her face. It pressurized instantly, wheel spinning from the force of my act. It locked into place, metal bars sliding down.

Cortes banged against the door, her shouts muffled. That'll hold her for a good minute or two.

I turned back to face Savin. His grin had slipped away, apparently realizing what this meant. There was only one way out now, and I'd be damned if I wasn't going to fight my way through.

I could hear sizzling as she started to melt away the metal. The door was nearly a foot thick. It would take her a while.

Hopefully, just enough time for me to get away.

For a second, Savin and I just stared at each other, wondering who would make the first move. Cortes' attempts to break through the door punctuated the still silence. Then Savin held out his arms and said, "Well? I'm waiting."

I took it as a challenge, and charged forward.

I had only a thin idea of how I was going to manage this. With my back foot, I leapt off the step, angling myself at the wall and kicking off it. Twisted around, kicked off the banister on the other side.

In three leaps I was already at the top of the steps. Savin wasn't even ready. He took a half-step back, reconsidered, then reached out to grab me as I got close. But I anticipated it, and threw my legs out before me.

Maybe I saw Spider-Man and got inspired. Parkour had its uses, even in moments like this.

I avoided his grasping hand, feet landing on his chest. It sent him reeling back, but Savin wasn't down yet. As soon as I made contact, he grabbed my leg and threw me down, and we hit the deck at once.

Despite my leg being caught, I managed to land in a roll, and wrench myself away. Savin was
sprawled on his stomach, and by the time he recovered, I was already in a full-tilt sprint.

I was back on the main deck, now on the rear end of the ship. Pro: I was now closer to the docks. Con: The docks were filled with more goons, and I still hadn't gotten off this boat. Also, more crates, because we can never have enough ammunition, can we?

Spider-Man was somewhere around here. I could hear him trolling the rest of the Extremis. I dashed through the crates, hoping to break Savin's line of sight on me and get away before he could get back to his feet.

It wasn't him I should've been worried about.

If I hadn't been looking behind me, watching for Savin, I would've noticed the other guy before I ran into him — literally. I couldn't believe it when I ran smack into another Extremis mercenary. I only saw him at the last second and didn't have enough time to swerve around. He saw me the second before I crashed into him.

I hit him and tripped, skidding across the deck on my side for a good twelve feet before coming to a stop. I flipped over on my elbows, looking behind me.

The other man looked up at me, a little dazed. We shared a startled look for one impossibly long moment, before he finally seemed to recognize me and snarled, fists clawing as he pulled himself back up.

I didn't even say anything as I scurried back to my feet, spinning around and running pell-mell into a random direction.

It was stupid. I should've been paying more attention. Considering the weeks I'd been on the run, I should be more prepared, I should be better than this. I wondered how easy it would have been, had this situation occurred earlier. If Wanda and Pietro had been with me. If I didn't have several weeks to relax and let myself get lazy, dulling my senses and instincts.

I was so angry. It wasn't just that I wanted to be better. It was that they wanted me to be better, too.

I wanted to be what they made me.

And I despised myself for it.

I had to set aside my self-loathing for later contemplation, when I suddenly found myself at a dead end. A wall of crates stood fifteen feet over my head. Not impossible, surely.

But not enough time, either.

Pounding footsteps behind me. I whirled around. The sentry had caught up, had me cornered. He had a wicked grin on his face, the veins around his eyes crackling red as his eyes started to glow. My memories put a face to a name: Dager, who used to tell crude jokes and liked to think himself stronger than Savin.

Unfortunately, he wasn't particularly as clever.

I stepped back as he advanced on me. My back hit the wall. For a second, I panicked. Then I shouted, "Duck!"

"Duck? Seriously?" Dager snorted, throwing me a ridiculous look. "What do I look like, some kinda idiot —"
He didn't get to finish before Spider-Man swooped in from above and punted him in the head.

Dager went flying. I watched as he smashed through some crates, then fell off the edge and crashed somewhere on the lower deck.

Spider-Man came back around, landing in a three-point crouch before come back up, hands on his hips. "Well, that wasn't so hard — Aah!"

Without warning, I lunged at him. Spider-Man tried to scramble away, but I managed to knock him down just before the gunshot rang out.

Something hot ripped across my arm just before we hit the deck. I clamped down my urge to cry out in pain, instead keeping Peter covered as I looked up, up towards the top deck, and the man with the pistol aimed at our heads.

Aldrich Killian.

"You're putting me behind schedule, Miss Fletcher," Killian said, his voice reverberating in the cold winter air. His free hand gripped the railing tightly as he looked down. There were more Extremis mercenaries around him, some other dudes I didn't recognize, and a bespectacled woman at his side. "The Mandarin doesn't like it when things don't go according to plan. And you, my dear, have made things very hard for us recently. I'll make sure you'll live long enough to regret that."

The Mandarin? I had no words, just gaped up at him. His threats, that gun, seemed inconsequential next to that information. So, it was true. I was right. Killian and his Extremis project were working for the Mandarin. But who was that woman beside him?

She looked like a civilian, dressed in casual clothes and loose hair. Behind her glasses, her expression seemed uncomfortable. I had a feeling she wasn't used to this mercenary work. So, not an Extremis. What did Killian need her for?

As he spoke, the rest of the Extremis group caught up, surrounding us on the deck in this little clearing. Nowhere to go. Nowhere to run.

Slowly, I rose to my feet, Spider-Man following. Killian wasn't going to shoot me, that much I knew. I carefully placed myself in front of Peter — my height meant that Killian wouldn't get a good angle on him.

I didn't really have a good comeback, so I said, "You started this."

Killian laughed, lowering his pistol. "Oh, you think this is my fault? Sweetheart, this has been years in the making. You want someone to blame, don't look any further than Stark tower. That man? That legacy? Has done more damage to this country than you could ever understand. I'm just trying to set what's right."

I looked around at the Extremis mercenaries. Savin and Cortes was amongst them (Cortes now with a significantly bruised face). I gestured to them at large and said, "How? By blowing it up?"

"Means to an end," Killian shrugged, nonchalant. The flood lights gleamed off his suit, seemed to give him this strange holy glow. His smile made me wish I was close enough to break his nose. "The world isn't pretty, Mia. Tony Stark didn't fight our wars with kind words and some flowers. Neither can I. Do you really want to live in a place where everyone worships him and his cronies like false gods?"

"At least Tony Stark doesn't hide behind his creepy bodyguards!" Spider-Man called out, surprising
me. "He's not afraid to fight guys like you!"

Killian's narrowed. Instead of remarking on that statement, he asked, "Who are you again? Spider-Boy? Iron-Man's pathetic little sidekick?"

"I'm not a sidekick!" Peter shouted indignantly. I threw him a look over my shoulder, silently telling him to shut up, but he just got going. "And it's Spider-Man!"

"And you call me out for protecting myself," Killian drawled, looking unimpressed. "While you hide behind a mask, pretending you have any authority to decide what's right or wrong. At least your beloved idol Tony Stark shows his face, so we know how to find him —"

A loud groan interrupted him, followed by the sound of breaking wood. Everyone turned around in surprise as Dager reappeared, looking ill. There was something wrong with his face. His clothes were on fire, but it seemed he didn't notice.

"H-help…" he gasped, reaching out for his nearest comrade. "N-need juice…"

Just like that, the entire atmosphere changed.

The others backed away from him, alarmed. Dager stumbled forward, unbalanced. His hands and face were already simmering, but it seemed to be traveling of the rest of his body. Flames dripped off him in wet globs, burning footprints in his wake.

"Please!" He cried out, when no one moved to help him. "It — it hurts! It's not enough! I need more!"

"Mia…?" Spider-Man said, his voice rising in trepidation as Dager stumbled closer, clutching at his chest. His face was completely red, eyes white-hot, and the glow seemed only to spread further. The clothes were burning right off his body.

Peter gripped my arm. "What's going on? What's happening?"

I was in awe. I could only step back, my instincts warning me to retreat. This wasn't good. This wasn't good at all.

"What the hell?" Killian demanded, leaning over the railing to watch Dager's stumbling gait. "Someone get him out of here before he gets sick!"

"No, the chemical's collapsing!" The woman cried, clutching Killian's sleeve. "He's unstable!"

"Clear the area!" Savin called, backing away, eyes wide. It was the first time I'd ever seen him scared. "He's gonna blow!"

"ANYONE! PLEASE!" Dager shouted, but started coughing, stumbled, fell into a crate. It burst open, and he fell, still burning, on an array of missiles.

"We gotta go," I said to Peter, voice high-pitched with panic. "We have to go now!"

Suddenly, everyone was shouting. People scattered, realizing the hell that was about to rain down on them when an a highly volatile Extremis mercenary was left near anything even remotely explosive. The area turned to chaos as everyone decided to jump ship while they still could. Killian was scrambling down the steps of the top deck, going two at a time while his entourage piled in behind him, fighting to go first.
Savin had disappeared in an instant, along with most of the Extremis group. They were better trained for the occasion. In the back of my mind, I wondered how often it happened before.

I pivoted and started to run. I couldn't see the docks but I knew where they were. Maybe I could make it in time —

"Hang on!"

An arm wrapped around my waist and suddenly my feet weren't on the ground anymore. I cried out, surprised, as I was suddenly swinging through the air, the ship's deck shrinking beneath me at near-sickening rate. My head swung back and for a moment I was dizzy from the g-force, before I reached the top of the pendulum arc and started swinging down again.

"Don't worry, I got you!" Spider-Man called over the rush of wind, as I wrapped my arms around his neck, clinging for dear life. The boat was still right there, so close. I could see Dager, seizing, spasming, his entire body going white —

BOO-OOOOOM.

Dager disintegrated in a flash of light. A ball of fire exploded from where he last stood — followed by many others, increasing in size, as the missiles and bombs and whatever else combusted at once.

The sky turned to day, the weather to summer as the cargo ship turned into a raging inferno, a massive cloud of fire and ash pluming hundreds of feet into the air. Rockets went off like fireworks, shrieking into the air and exploding without target. I gazed in awe as the bulbous destruction came within feet of touching us, before we fell away along Spider-Man's web.

While he was focused on getting us away, my attention was still on the boat. The explosions just kept coming. Metal, wood, and random debris went flying as it was torn apart. The entire ship shifted and jerked as a massive hole was cut through its hull, and I could hear the vague rush of water filling up beneath the roar of the fire. All around, little black forms scattered like ants, terrified at this unrelenting terror.

The air rapidly cooled as we swooped further and further away. My face felt like I had a fever, or maybe sunburn. It seemed to last forever, but it took only a few seconds for Spider-Man to reach the edge of the shipyard, on a street overlooking the disaster.

My feet hit the ground too hard. I nearly collapsed, knees like jelly. I grabbed the chain link fence to support myself — one side of it was warm from exposure to the explosion. I quickly let go again.

Spider-Man wasn't looking so hot, either. He swayed on his feet, staring silently at the carnage.

"What do we do now?" He asked, voice barely a whisper.

We didn't look at each other. Instead, we watched as another boat, smaller, sped away from the docks — the yacht I'd seen before. Its engines were nearly screaming as it skipped along the water, disappearing into the night.

Killian, escaping.

Sirens in the distance. Along the streets, traffic came to a stop. People were starting to gather. Nearby, a taxi stopped, its drivers stepping out to gawk. He didn't even notice us standing there.

As more explosions continued along the length of the cargo ship, I finally said, "Let's head home."
have a little doodle of Mia and Dmitri first meeting :)

http://rebelcolumbia.tumblr.com/

Chapter End Notes

Thanks for hanging in there for so long! In case you didn't know, I had finals week, so that's why I couldn't write for a while. Anyways, hope you enjoyed :)}
Hey guys, thanks for being patient with me lol. In case you missed the last update, I changed Ch. 44 (Part Six), for the purpose of marking when Iron Man 3 begins in this fic. Part Six onwards, we are officially within the timeline of that movie.

Chapter Forty-Eight

The walk home was made in silence.

By say walk, I literally mean walk, because the metro was closed and we couldn't find a taxi to hail down. Our only goal at first was to get as far away from the shipyard as possible — with a quick detour to get Peter's backpack, which he had hidden in an alleyway about a few blocks away. I waited while he changed — there was no way he could walk around dressed like Spider-Man, especially in this weather.

I didn't say anything for him when Peter returned, dressed in regular jeans and his winter jacket. I had no words at all — I couldn't summon even the merest of emotional reactions. I felt utterly dead inside.

You'd think this would be weird for me. But it was a strange-not-strange experience. Peter Parker was Spider-Man? Old news. Yesterday's paper. Yawn.

There was no swinging or running or any of that nonsense anymore. Neither Peter or I had the energy left.

It wasn't until we were crossing the Queensborough Bridge did Peter finally ask, "Are you ever going to tell me the truth about what happened to you?"

I didn't answer him.

A cold wind whistled between the metal scaffolding around us. I could feel Peter's eyes on me but I kept my eyes on the road ahead. A lone truck passed by, kicking up slush beneath its wheels. A light dusting of snow had gathered on our shoulders. Peter shivered. I wasn't cold.

"Mia?" He said.

Still, I was quiet.

"You're just never going to answer me, are you?" Peter huffed, folding his arms and hunching his shoulders. "Fine. It's not like we almost just died or anything, anyways."

Ahh, guilt. How I've missed you.
To be honest, I was just too exhausted to find the right words. A part of me wanted to tell Peter. Right now, would be the perfect opportunity, in fact. We were all alone. There was no one to overhear us. And the walk was long enough that I could've explain everything, probably with time to spare.

But I didn't.

"You're not even going to ask me how I'm Spider-Man?" Peter asked, throwing me a desperate look, when we were ten blocks from home. "Mia, come on! Say something!"

But I didn't. Couldn't.

"Mia, please." Peter begged. His breath puffed out in front of his face, in front of wide, pleading eyes. But when it became clear that he wasn't going to get nothing out of me, Peter's shoulders dropped, his brow drawing together. "Your nose is bleeding."

That finally got a reaction out of me. I pressed my hand to my face. Tacky blood met my fingers.


Even the smell. It was like I was still there. Wet cement, stale air, blood, sweat, and leather.

The grinning faces of Savin, Cortes, Brandt, Dager, the others, as they pushed me around the ring. The flickering fire beneath their skin. Wounds healing in an instant. The constant dosages they needed to take, through small vials locked in labs and suitcases.

I wasn't seeing New York. I was back in the Crucible. It was Peter's voice that reminded me where I was. Who I was.

Still shaken from the fight, Peter still had enough sense to tell someone about it. Specifically, Tony Stark.

It was good idea, really. If only everyone thought so.

"Mr. Stark!" Peter began, a near-full-volume as soon as the line was picked up. "Mr. Stark, it's me, Peter! Peter Parker! You gotta listen! Aldrich Killian, he's working for the Mandarin —"

"W-what?" I heard a drowsy voice on the other side, sounding confused and annoyed. We had paused on the sidewalk, keeping a lookout to see if there was anyone following us. "Peter? What the hell — what are you calling me for? What time is it? God damn, kid, I can't be —"

"I know, sir, I'm sorry its late!" Peter apologized frantically, pacing back and forth on the street, wringing his hands. "We just escaped this big fight on the docks. Aldrich Killian was there and he had all these crazy-ass soldiers, and the whole boat blew up, and I'm pretty sure they're working for the Mandarin —"

"Whoa, whoa, slow down, kid, breathe!" Tony said from the other side. "Did you just say you blew up a boat? Christ, what did I say about being a friendly neighborhood Spider-Man —"

"Mr. Stark, it wasn't me! It was Aldrich Killian!"

"Aldrich who?"
"Aldrich Killian! Head of AIM!"

"Never heard of him."

"I'm serious! He's big trouble, Mr. Stark! You have to stop him before he does something bad!"

I heard a long sigh on the other end. I had a feeling that maybe this wasn't the first time Peter called Tony Stark in this manner. "Look, kid, I've got a lot of problems right now, and I can't go chasing off every lead on the Mandarin. You have any evidence this guy Aldrich did anything?"

Peter visibly winced. "Um, no,"

Another sigh. "Look, Peter, it's...what, almost midnight over here? I got a lot of shit to do tomorrow. I'm glad you're trying to help, but I really need some sleep right now, okay? Haven't had a siesta in over 72 hours, I'll check it out in the morning..."

"But Mr. Stark, wait —" Peter started, but apparently Tony Stark hung up, because he ended on, "Hello? Hello, Mr. Stark? Iron Man?"

Peter dropped the phone, scowling at its screen, then looked up at me with worry in his eyes. "Well, I told him. You think it'll be enough?"

I could only shrug. Tony had a point. We didn't have evidence, and no way to prove that Aldrich Killian had anything behind the recent attacks. Unless Tony Stark simply trusted our word, which I doubted. He didn't even know me. I doubted he knew Peter for very long, and even if he did, didn't seem to respect the word of a kid enough to immediately hop out of bed and hunt down Killian's ass.

We had to sneak back into the apartment through the window. The front door would be too loud. Apparently, Peter was an old pro just crawling up the walls on sticky, silent fingers. I, however, needed a lift.

Peter, apparently resigned to my silence, said not a word as he lifted me up with a cord of web, helping me through his window before carefully pulling it closed. The apartment was dead silent. We stood in the middle of his room, facing each other but not meeting eyes, unable to do anything else for one long moment.

"Well, I guess it's good night, then," Peter muttered, stuffing his hands in his pockets.

I glanced at him. Then walked out the door.

And returned a minute later, first aid kit and a pack of frozen peas in one hand.

Peter was already sitting in bed, checking his burned ankle, when I slipped back inside. He looked up, surprised, then jumped when I dropped the old TIME magazine into his lap. Peter stared at it, then looked up at me, utterly baffled.

I pointed at the front cover. At the girl in the yellow coat, standing over the wreckage, shield in hand. "That's me."

Peter's first reaction was a disbelieving snort. "What?"

Then he looked down at the cover. Back at me. Then did a double-take. "W-whoa. No way. No freaking way!"

"Shh!" I hissed, slapping a hand over his mouth, coming to crouch beside his bed. "Jiminy
Christmas, Peter, you're going to wake up the whole building."

Peter was still talking behind my hand, voice muffled as he gesticulated wildly at the magazine. He didn't stop when I pulled away, "— read this when it came out! I knew it! I knew you were alive! That email you sent, from Sokovia? Oh, I knew it, I knew you were there! I can't believe I had proof this entire time!"

I let out a shaky, uncertain chuckle. "You were t-trying that hard to find me?"

"Would I not?" Peter's eyebrows shot up, and he threw out his arms. "Mia, holy shit! You're an international hero!"

"Peter, I'm not even close —"

"You started a freaking revolution! Who else can say that?" Peter demanded, caught between awe and pure delight. He clutched his head, hair going awry. "I mean, come on! And they know! They know you have powers! How did you do it? How did you keep them from telling your name?"

"I just never told them," I shrugged. I set the first aid kid down, opened it up, pulled out gauze and sterilizing spray. While he spoke, I took a look at his ankle; it was angry red and badly blistered.

"You're unbelievable, you know that?" Peter told me, looking only a little annoyed. Peter let out a hiss when I applied the spray, then started carefully applying gauze pads and tape. He waved the magazine. "How long have you been hanging onto this?"

"Since I first saw one in Nice. Brought it home with me. As a reminder, I guess." I said, smiling a little. But it faded away as another thought occurred to me. Propping up his foot on a pillow, I laid the bag of frozen peas on top. "Peter, I know you think it's awesome and all but...it wasn't. It was scary. People were dying all around me. There were tanks and men with guns. I barely got out of there alive. That whole revolution thing? That was just an accident. Me and the twins were just trying to escape."

"You started a revolution by accident?" Peter repeated, looking unimpressed by my attempt to rationalize the situation. "Really? That's the best you got?"

I just shook my head, sighed to myself. It probably would've made more sense if he'd been there. I'd only thrown the rock to distract the officer, to keep him from killing Pietro. I didn't mean for it to start a stampede.

I reached for the needle and thread, then pulled down my sleeve. The bullet had grazed my bicep, not too far from where I'd nearly been shot in Sokovia, the same wound Wanda had tended to. With a bit of iodine, I cleaned the wound, threaded the needle, and punctured my skin.

Peter watched, grimacing a little, as I began to stitch it closed with one hand. After a long moment, he finally said, "...You've done this before, haven't you?"

I glanced up, raised my eyebrows. The cut wasn't that bad — it didn't even hurt that much as I thought. "Had lots of time to practice. We were being chased the entire time. First the Cheka, then the Extremis soldiers. Those guys we fought on the boat? I first met them in Sokovia. They followed me all the way across Europe. We were only a few steps ahead of them at any time, and they always caught up with us. First in Novi Grad, then the train out of Sokovia. I was there when they blew up the ship in Nice. It was pure damn luck they didn't catch us there. The worst was London, though."

"London," Peter frowned. "You mean — the attack on the bridge? That was you?"
"They knew what we were trying to do." I replied, shaking my head. Even now, I regretted my stupidity. "I was afraid of traveling by boat to America, because of Nice, so we went to England instead. I figured if we met up with the guys who wrote the article on me, we'd have a better chance of getting home alive. But I should've known it was too obvious. They even knew the route we were going to take. The bridge was an excellent target. Easy to destroy, isolate us, keep eyes away while they tried to recover runaway assets. And it's where I got this." I tapped my forehead, at the scar splitting my brow. "They sent their best assassin. A man called the Winter Soldier. A myth."

"The Winter Soldier?" Peter frowned. "I never heard of him."

"Well, that's the idea, isn't it?" I smiled wryly. Then averted my gaze, returned to my stitches. The little pricks of pain helped me concentrate. "The Winter Soldier is a KGB assassin. As far as anyone's concerned, he doesn't exist. People who've seen him rarely survive. The rest can't even describe him. But I can tell you this. He has a metal arm. A red star painted on his shoulder."

A look crossed Peter's face. Dark, knowing. "Like yours."

I nodded slowly, closing my eyes. "He was the one who trained me."

"The Winter Soldier," Peter looked down at the magazine, flipped absentmindedly through the pages. "Is he Extremis, too?"

"No," I shook my head. "A super soldier."

"Super —" Peter stopped himself, looked up at me. "What — like Captain America?"

"More or less." I said, shrugging one shoulder. It was hard to say how they really compared. I only had knowledge of the one. I smirked to myself as I said, "You could say I'm a newer model."

Peter gaped at me. Blinked once, twice, three times in succession, then shook his head and blurted, "Whoa, wait, timeout! You're telling me you're a super soldier? This entire time and you — but how, you're not even — you were so sick and — and you died — but somehow —"

"I'm alive?" I offered. "Uh, yeah, that's kinda the thing, right? They took me, exposed me to radiation, wild experimentation with some blue glowy Aesir thing, I don't know. Faked my death. I'd probably actually be dead if they hadn't. I was already dying when they turned me into...this."

I gestured to myself vaguely. There was a slight hint of disgust in my tone that I didn't quite intend. But it was there. Maybe it was true.

"But how —?" Peter was still struggling to understand. "You'd need the serum. I didn't think anyone was able to reinvent another one. Not successfully, at least."

"They didn't have to worry about that." I replied. "It was already in my blood. Apparently, I got it from my paternal genes."

I let that sink in. Peter stared at me, his face going blank as the realization hit him. He lifted a shaky finger at me. "You're not saying that Captain America is your — he's your—?"

"Father?" I was smiling again, a little amused by his reaction. I had finished stitching up my wound, and was now attending to the smaller, lesser abrasions on our skins. "I had the same look on my face when someone suggested the idea. I suppose it's possible though. It's not like Mom ever really said anything, right? But y-yeah, possibly. No proof yet. Maybe I'll find out someday."

Peter nodded to himself, and it went quiet again as he started rereading the old article, mouthing the
words. Apparently, something stuck out to him, because his eyes flicked back and forth repeatedly over a certain part, and he looked back up at me, lips pressed tightly. "They taught you this. How to fight. In the...in the Crucible, right?"

I nodded silently, eyes sliding over to the windows. The name still sent a chill through my veins. My hands turned to fists around the comforters. "I was telling the truth when I said I don't remember much of it. The Crucible is — was — a stronghold for an old Soviet faction. A science and military facility, where they experimented, and crafted new weapons. Weapons like me. Warriors. Assassins."

"They taught you how to... kill?" Peter's voice cracked on the last word, face turning pale.

Images flashed in my head. The speeding train. The gun. The dead Extremis soldier. I didn't look at Peter when I said, "That was the intention. And they sure as hell tried. Conditioning, torture, brainwashing. But I refused. I wasn't going to be what they wanted me to be. So, I escaped. It's kind of ironic, though," I laughed to myself, voice rasping at buried pain. "If it hadn't been for what they did to me, I never would've made it out alive."

I let out a long sigh. It was strange — I suddenly felt very light, out of nowhere, like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders. I studied the pattern of Peter's bed. I hadn't told him everything. A lie, a secret, here and there. My act of killing, my trigger phrase. Not yet. Not yet.

But everything else? Finally released.

"I can speak five languages. Russian, Sokovian, French, Spanish, English." I muttered to myself, knowing my own skillset better than myself. It was what they wanted from me, their perfect design. "They taught me hand-to-hand combat, how to use different types of guns, knives, weapons. How to operate in the open, how to hunt down my target. How to spot a tail from thirty feet away. How to outrun a moving vehicle. How not to feel pain, because it's only a distraction. How to not stop until the mission was completed."

I looked to Peter, biting my lip. "It was very efficient. I guess if you could call it anything, it was efficient. I learned a lot in just two years. I'd probably be even better if I hadn't escaped."

It didn't feel real to talk about it. I didn't even feel quite like myself — cold and distant. Like what I was telling happened to someone else. Maybe it was easier to think about that way.

"Oh," Peter's voice was very tiny, and he bowed his head. "That makes my story sound completely lame by comparison."

"What?" I threw him a curious expression. "You mean how you got your powers? Spill the beans, Maverick."

Peter lifted his head, flashed me a sheepish grin. "I got bit by a genetically-altered spider."

I waited for him to continue, but Peter didn't say anything else. I made a face, straightened a little. "Wait, that's it? A bug bit you and suddenly you can crawl up walls and bench-press a bus? Just like that?"

"They're arachnids," Peter groused, like he knew I knew better. Then he shrugged, "But, uh, yeah, that's it. Just a freak accident, I guess. No evil scientists, or cults, or weird Soviet conspiracies."

This was wild. I actually started laughing a little. "You know what, no, th-that makes perfect sense. That fits you entirely, Pete. I shouldn't be surprised at all. Doesn't explain how you know Tony Stark, though."
Peter shrugged, an ironic half-smirk on his face, as if he couldn't decide whether to be proud or embarrassed. "I guess you could say I made my big break during the Incident. People had heard of me before, but I never went out in daylight, never talked to anyone, just stayed out of the way for the most part. This time, though? Everything was off the board.

"We could see everything from Queens. I watched as that giant portal opened up, and just this massive army came pouring out. Right over the middle of the city...I knew I had to go over there. I saw Iron Man, and Thor, and Captain America, I knew I could do the same. The bridges were closed, but I still made my way across. I didn't see a lot of action, but I saved a bus full of people from becoming alien dinner, and stopped a wall from falling on a family or two. I don't know, it was all kind of a blur. There wasn't really a lot of fighting involved, I was just helping people. That's enough for me, I guess."

"And Tony Stark? Is that where y-you met him?"

"No, actually," Peter laughed, a little breathless. "He actually found me, here. At home. Said I'd won an internship, but I never applied for it. Then, when Aunt May was out of the room, he showed me video of Spider-Man during the Incident. I didn't make it to national news, since the Avengers were the real big deal, but he noticed me from the remaining news footage. I'm not sure how he figured out it was me. I don't think he wants me to know. Anyways, that's how I got my 'internship,'" Peter made air-quotes here. "It doesn't really mean much. I don't get anything special out of it, no new suit or anything. Mr. Stark said as long as I keep doing what I'm doing, saving people and doing the right thing, then he'll back me up in case anything goes wrong."

"Which it did," I pointed out.

"Yeah," Peter made a face. He frowned at his comforter, played with it between his fingers. "Look, I don't really know Mr. Stark, but I think he's...dealing with a lot right now. He went through the portal with a nuclear missile on his back. Almost died. I guess it's still messing with him."

Somehow, that didn't surprise me, either. I just nodded in understanding. "Don't blame him. I don't think that's something anyone can just...get over. But that doesn't explain why you decided to sew up your old pajamas and start doing the dumb classic superhero thing to begin with."

"Well, I didn't mean to, not initially." Peter snorted, but his humor died in the next moment. His gaze dropped down, and his expression turned somber. He rolled the magazine up in his hands, paper crackling under his clenched fists. "But then Uncle Ben died."

It was like someone killed the lights. Everything just stopped. My stomach did a flip, and dread coiled in my gut. My shoulders tensed a little, and I watched Peter carefully. He couldn't look me in the eyes. "What do you mean? It was just a carjacking, wasn't it? You weren't actually there —"

"I was," Peter cut me off, voice hard. He opened his mouth, but nothing came out, and when he inhaled, it was a deep, shuddering breath. Peter pressed a hand to his face, pulling his head down. When he finally spoke again, his voice was thick and muffled. "I was there. It was my fault. I was coming back from the library, and Uncle Ben was supposed to pick me up. Only I wasn't actually at the library. I-I was goofing off at the skatepark. Picking fights with idiots because it felt good. Wearing a mask, it felt — it was like I was a different person. I could be whoever I wanted to be."

His shoulders started to shake. My hands had gone cold at the growing realization; nevertheless, I reached out, put my hand over Peter's. But he flinched away, tucked his hands against his stomach. Revealed the tears streaming down his face.

"I could've saved him, Mia." His dark eyes glistened in the faint light of the window. "I-I knew what
I could do. But I didn't stop the carjacker. I'd seen him earlier that night and I just...didn't do anything. If I'd known that he was armed, that he was heading west, to the library, to where I should have been...I would've...I-I would've…"

But Peter could only shake his head, unable to speak anymore. A choked sob spilled out, and I sat up on the bed, wrapping my arms around Peter as he broke down.

Peter buried his face in my shoulder, hands clutching my back— I didn't know what to say, so I just hugged him tighter.

I closed my eyes, bit my lip, just as I felt a lump form in my throat. Something in my chest hurt. It was hard to describe. A helpless ache that I couldn't shake. Something that might have been there this entire time, but only now I had become aware of it.

It took the better part of a half-hour for Peter to finally calm down enough to continue legibly.

"W-when I f-finally got back, Uncle Ben w-was already on the ground." Peter whispered, his voice hoarse and muffled against my shoulder. "The car was gone. He was just lying there, and there was—there was just blood a-all over —" Peter stopped, unable to continue for a moment. Swallowed hard, he said, "Uncle Ben, he-he tried to stop the carjacker, I-I don't know why, I j-just... I tried to save him! He was right there and no one was around, so I called f-for help b-but it wasn't...I wasn't fast enough. And I was going to tell him. I was going to tell him what happened to me. He knew something was wrong. I was being stupid, irresponsible, and I wanted to make it up to him. But I never got the chance.

"Always too late," Peter muttered to himself, shaking his head. "I couldn't help you. It was right after you died, and I-I couldn't handle it. I didn't think it could get any worse. And then the aliens attacked. And then Hedy..."

I picked my head up, surprised. My brow furrowed. "Mom? Y-You tried to get to her?

"It was the first thing I did." Peter nodded, his eyes shut tight, lips pressed together. "But I was too late. I-I got slowed down by these people, they were trapped in another building, and I-I thought I had enough time to get them out first...and then this bike messenger was trapped under some rubble. Another guy trapped in his car, which had been flipped over...by the time I finally reached the apartment, it was just...destroyed. This massive alien was on top of it, dead. I-I tried to dig her out, b-but...there was nothing I could do. I'm s-sorry, Mia. I'm sorry. It's my fault she's gone."

"No, don't say that!" I snapped, grabbing Peter's shoulder, my grip hard. I seemed far angrier than I intended, so I toned the expression down, but kept my tone hard as I looked him in the eye and said in a shaky voice, "I-I would've done the exact same thing, o-okay? Don't be sorry for saving lives — they wouldn't still be here if it weren't for you. I don't blame you. I-I don't think Mom would, either."

Peter eyes were still red and tight. "But I lost you. Uncle Ben. Hedy. One after the other. It was like everything was just falling apart right in front of me."

Losing Mom still hurt. I thought it had gotten better, but bringing it back made me realize that I hadn't recovered as much as I thought. Still, I refused to accept that Peter had any part of it. I was not going to let him take responsibility for that. "You didn't kill her, okay? You didn't bring the aliens down and attacked this city. You did the best you could, and I think that's all anyone could ask for."

Peter held my gaze for a long moment, swallowing hard as he absorbed my words. I couldn't tell if he'd accepted them or not. Eventually, he bowed his head and murmured, "For a long time, I didn't think anything would get better. Last year was the worst thing I'd ever experienced. I lost almost
everyone, and I was keeping this secret, and I just felt so alone...and then I got your message. And it brought me back. It gave me...hope, I guess."

A dry, laugh came out of his mouth, but his voice broke half-way. "I guess you're still pretty good at that, huh?"

I tried to smile but failed miserably. My hand was still on his shoulder. A minute passed without word, until I finally asked, "Why didn't you say anything? Why didn't you tell me?"

Peter shrugged, not looking up. "I don't know. I was scared, I guess. And Mr. Stark didn't want me to. I suppose I could ask you the same question."

Touché. I had to mull that one over. "I don't know, either. I guess...I guess I was scared, too. I didn't want you to think I was different. That I'd changed. I was afraid you wouldn't see me as the old Mia anymore."

Peter threw me an incredulous look. "But you aren't. I mean, you're different but not...not in a bad way. You're still Mia. You're still you."

"And you're still Peter," I replied, suppressing what was almost a smirk. "I mean, aside from the dumb suit."

"You're telling me you'd never wear some fancy get-up if you had the chance?" Peter threw me a disbelieving look. "C'mon."

I remembered the fatigues I'd worn when attacking the Crucible. The blue jacket with the white star on the chest. I just threw Peter an innocent look, and said, "Nope. I'm not that cheesy."

"What? Not even a cool superhero name?"

"Absolutely not," I lied. In the back of my mind, I knew I would eat those words, if or when Peter found out about Rebel Columbia. "I like my anonymity, thanks."

And just like that, the tension finally broke. Peter laughed, and as tearful as it was, he finally seemed to be feeling better. "Michelle's right, you are a loser.""

"Excuse me, that is a lie," I said, holding up a finger with mock-offense. "I know for a fact that Michelle would never speak to you directly."

"True. But she did call me a loser," Peter pointed out. "And since you're related to me, then that means you're a loser, too."

"That is not how it works."

"Face it, Goose, you're in a family of losers." Peter held out his arms, fighting a grin pulling across his face. "Just accept it."

"A family of weirdos, more like it," I rolled my eyes, then threw him a suspicious look. "You're not going to tell anyone, right?"

"Tell anyone what? That my freakishly-tall cousin who looks like a super soldier is actually a super soldier?" Peter raised his eyebrows at me. "Of course not. My lips are totally sealed. As long as you don't tell anyone I'm Spider-Man."

"And reveal to the world I'm actually related to him? I think I'll pass," I joked. Peter punched my arm
and I laughed.

✮✮✮

If Tony Stark ever did investigate Aldrich Killian, I didn't hear about it. Peter called the next morning and got only the answering machine. Texts went unanswered. Whatever Stark was up to, he clearly thought it more important.

For that matter, I had seen or heard nothing from Killian or his Extremis soldiers, either. Wherever they ran off to, they seemed to be in hiding. The weekend passed without incident, and Peter and I were settled with the possibility that perhaps the problem had been dealt with after all. We just had to wait and see.

That Monday, we had healed up enough that gym class wouldn't be filled with awkward stares. I still had a few bruises left, but my face was thankfully untouched, and I kept a gauze pad over my stitches. As far as Aunt May knew, I'd banged myself against the top corner of my dresser. Peter's bad ankle was explained by a tumble going down some stairs. He carefully kept the burns out of sight. Aunt May had absolutely no idea we were up till two in the morning that Friday, after having been out all night.

I kept my distance from Dmitri. I was afraid of reprisals from Killian, and since he knew Dmitri's mom, I was afraid he might learn something about me from it. It seemed unlikely, since she hated me so much, and why would she talk about her kid's tutor to some weird famous guy? But still. I didn't want Dmitri to get hurt. Better safe than sorry.

It was gym class, though, that I finally learned what had happened.

We were playing indoor volleyball, which I discovered I was excellent at — particularly with spiking balls over the net. Instant win. People actually wanted me on their team now. It was surprisingly gratifying. To think I disregarded gym as stupid before this. I was actually having fun.

It helped, of course, to have Michelle, Ned, and Peter on my side. Peter was holding himself back a little, but was fast enough not to be noticeably clumsy. Michelle because she wasn't bad either, and Ned because he was always so excited and happy when we did something right. It was contagious. I was grinning, laughing as our team beat the other, time and again.

That came to a stop when I heard some guys chatting from the other net behind me.

"Did you hear? My mom's panicking, she's thinks there's gonna be another —"

"Wait, what, you mean the Chinese Theater?"

"Yeah, the one in Los Angeles. Someone blew it up last night —"

I had just heard it when I jumped for the volleyball coming over the net. The words sent a jolt through me, and I slammed my palm down, sending the ball rocketing to the floor.

It blasted off the linoleum with the sound of a cannon. The other team jumped back as the ball torpedoed straight up, punching right through the ceiling tiles. Several cried out as debris fell.
Everyone turned to stare. I went stock still, shoulders rising to my ears in embarrassment. The ball dropped again, bouncing harmlessly away.

"Damn, Fletcher," Coach Wilson came by to inspect the damage, eyebrows rising at the new renovation in the ceiling, then down at me with the same expression. "You going through something right now? I know gym's a great place to work off some energy, but let's try to not kill anyone, okay?"

"Yes, Coach Wilson," I tried to smile apologetically, but it was more like a wince. "Sorry. W-won't do it again."

Coach Wilson just looked me over, decided my apology genuine, and walked away, shaking his head to himself. And that seemed to be that.

I knew it wasn't, though. I could feel the eyes still on me, even as everyone resumed. We played around the fallen tiles as if nothing happened, but it was just a ticking time bomb before someone brought it up. Some people were laughing about it now. People usually don't get away with damaging school property, but Coach Wilson tended to be pretty relaxed in terms of discipline. A part of me wondered if he even really wanted this job, sometimes.

Near the end of period, I was sitting on the bleachers, putting my tennis shoes on after changing out of my gym clothes. Michelle was sat next to me, reading some John Steinbeck novel, when someone walked up to me.

Astor Sloane.

"Hey," she said.

I looked up at her, then propped my elbows on my knees. My voice was dull. "Hey."

Astor looked extremely awkward. She couldn't seem to meet my eyes, and kept glancing towards the door, like she wanted to make a run for it. Shifting from one foot to the other, she started haltingly: "I just, uh, wanted to see if you're okay."

I blinked, surprised. Michelle actually stopped reading for a whole second. We exchanged looks, then I turned back to Astor, maintaining a cold expression. "Uh-huh."

Astor met my eyes, then averted her gaze to the floor. "Look, I know what I did to you was messed up. I was a real bitch, okay? Still am."

I was having a hard time trying to understand what was happening. "So this is you apologizing to me for the torment you put me through?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry, okay?" Astor said, sounding annoyed now. But the look she gave me was uncertain, almost a little scared. "I've just been, you know, thinking a lot lately —"

"Anyways," Astor glared at her, then back to me with a more reticent expression. "What happened to you — you know, your mom, and-and everything else, you didn't deserve it, okay? When I first heard you...passed away, or whatever... I didn't know how to react. A sick part of me thought finally. I guess I expected it to happen. The other part of me felt bad. I didn't like you, but I never actually wanted you to die. And when you came back? Well, fuck, what the hell was I supposed to do then? You turned into a freaking giant. It scared the shit out of me. I thought, great, here she is, about to destroy me now that she's back and ready to kick ass. But...you didn't. You could have. I know you
can. You just blasted a fucking hole through the ceiling. Instead you left me alone. And to me, I don't think I deserved that. You had every right to punch me in the face for what I put you through. It was only fair. I guess I'm thankful you didn't. So, I'm sorry. Yeah."

Astor came to a stop, scuffing her foot against the floor. Her words stunned me. I was actually rendered speechless.

I could feel Michelle looking at me. Behind Astor, I spotted Peter, watching this confrontation with a weirded-out expression. I wondered if he just heard all that.

"...Oh. Okay." I said lamely, at last. I was starting to feel awkward, too, but something about Astor's word struck me as surprisingly honest, and I believed her. I didn't like her. I wasn't sure I'd forgive her, if ever. But I did believe that she was sorry.

"Anyways," Astor shook her head, as if remembering her original idea, "If you're ever looking for something to do, uh, there's a spot open on the field hockey team. You know, if you're ever interested."

"Thanks." Was all I could come up with. I had absolutely no desire to join any sports team, now or in the future.

That's when Astor stuck out her hand towards my face. I stared at it, hesitant. What was this, a surrender? A draw? A sign of respect? That we were equal now?

Her expression was tight. It seemed she wasn't sure she wanted this, either.

But perhaps that's why she was doing it anyways.

I looked at her hand, then to Astor.

After a long second, I took her hand.

We shook quickly. I could feel everyone staring, and when the stupid formality of it all finally got to me, I quickly let go again. Just as Astor started to back away, I added, "If you're r-really sorry, Astor, you won't f-find another me to push around. That goes f-for your friends, too."

Astor paused, threw me a look over her shoulder, then nodded sullenly. I wasn't sure if she had other victims, but I had to stand up for them, too. It had to end here. I wasn't going to accept hypocrisy as some sort of false peace between us.

"Wow," Michelle finally said, after Astor had walked away. "That was really mature of you. I would've totally punched her in the face."

"Of course, you would have," I muttered, starting to smile as I finished up lacing my shoes.

It was a relief to head to lunch after that. I was starving, and a break from concentration was just what I needed to think about what I just heard. Peter was apparently on the same wavelength, because as we were waiting in line, he turned to me and asked, "So, what happened back there in gym class? I've never seen you lose control before. At least I don't think so."

"I haven't," I said to him, knowing I was usually more careful than this. Glancing around to make sure we weren't being overheard, I bent towards him and spoke in a hush. "I heard some guys talking. S-something happened in Los Angeles. The Chinese Theater?"

"Yeah?" Peter frowned, pulled out his phone to look it up. "I heard about it earlier. A suicide bomber
tried to blow it up. A dozen people died. No reported suspects. No one knows who did it, or why. No one's claimed responsibility. The blast was apparently over 3000 degrees Celsius —"

That must have been the clue that Peter go, because he suddenly looked up at me with wide eyes. "Oh no. You don't think —"

"It's possible," I said, my voice low. "The last attack in Los Angeles was an accident. And no one's connected it to Friday's ship explosion here, did they?"

"That was attributed to malfunctioning equipment," Peter said, scanning his phone with increasing worry. "No one's marked it as a terrorist threat. I can't believe Killian got away with it."

"It was an accident," I reminded him. "A misfire. It was never supposed to happen. And I don't think this one was, either."

"What?" Peter stared at me, bewildered, but I was unable to explain since we had just reached the food counter. But even afterwards, when we found a table and sat down, I couldn't explain either — Ned and Michelle had joined us, and I couldn't very well talk about terrorist conspiracy theories in front of them.

"I think the whole world's going to hell," Ned commented at one point, chewing happily on his burger. "It's like everything's on fire. First that explosion in the dockyard, now Los Angeles. Second time, actually! And then there's the war, and the attacks in Europe… you think it's ever going to end?"

"I hope so," Peter said, glowering at his food. "Maybe someone like Tony Stark can fix it."

"I wonder why he hasn't done anything yet," Ned mused, screwing up his mouth. "Or any of the other Avengers. This Ten Rings business seems like a big deal, you know?"

"Well, Captain America's in DC, or in hiding," I pointed out, numbering off on my fingers, "Hulk is also in hiding. Also, not a guy you want around explosions. Thor's fucked off back to Asgard or something. And who knows about the other two. What are their names again?"

"Hawkeye and Black Widow," Ned said at once, proud of himself for remembering. "They work for SHIELD, I think. Spies or assassins. Turned good, obviously. No powers or cool suits or anything. Just normal people."

"Jealous," Peter muttered. I threw him a look. What did that mean?

Ned misinterpreted it entirely. "I know, right? I wish I could be a superhero, flying around and doing cool shit."

"I don't," Michelle said from the end of the table. All three heads swiveled to look at her. She sat as far away from us as possible when it came to lunch, and almost never took part in our conversations. This was one of the rare exceptions where she looked up from her book and cast all of us a bored expression. "Why don't you guys ever talk about anything interesting? Like how President Ellis let Roxxon Oil off scot-free after their drill rig exploded and polluted our waters —"

She didn't get to finish because the PA system started screeching.

A collective cry across the cafeteria went up, and everyone clapped their hands over their ears. The TVs flickered, the usual school broadcast interrupted by static, then a rainbow screen. The loudspeakers, wired to the channel, crackled and popped, and everyone stopped what they were doing when the all the TVs around us turned red.
A single black logo appeared in the center.

Two crossed swords, surrounded by ten interlinking circles.

The Ten Rings.

A grainy broadcast began to play.

A fist smashed a fortune cookie on a table, splinters flying. A man in shadow, sitting on a throne. A deep, solemn voice spoke in an American accent, "True story about fortune cookies."

Guerillas gathering around a Humvee as a stout man with a long beard and wearing an elegant green robe stepped out of a Humvee in the middle of a desert. Dark sunglasses hid his eyes. "They look Chinese."

The Mandarin.

"They sound Chinese."

An extreme close-up of his dark eyes, olive skin flashing under overexposed lighting. "But they're actually an American invention."

A shot of hooded prisoners, pushed to their knees by separatists with AK-47s, from the same Humvee the Mandarin just stepped out of. "Which is why they're hollow, full of lies, and leave a bad taste in the mouth."

Another cookie, smashed, bang going off like a gunshot. "My disciples destroyed another American knock-off. The Chinese Theater."

Old, stock footage of the Chinese Theater back in the 50's. Then scores of men, gathering around, cheering, greeting the Mandarin with reverence. "Mr. President, I know this must be getting frustrating, but this season of terror is drawing to a close. And don't worry, the big one is coming."

President Ellis on a poster, jeered at by the separatists. The Mandarin, with a rifle, taking aim.

Firing.

Bullets puncturing holes through the paper, right between the President's eyes.

"Your graduation."
"Dats me"

Redid the old TIME cover, wanted to make it more dynamic :)
The cafeteria was silent.

No one knew what to do when the regular school broadcast came back on. We just looked at each other in stunned silence. Was that real? Did that really just happen?

The Mandarin had just hacked the airwaves — again. I hadn't seen the first time, but Peter had told me all about it. It was on the news for days. Now? I couldn't imagine the shitstorm that must be brewing in news stations around the world. How do they lose control of all channels, at once, twice?

Then someone laughed, and the cafeteria started filling up with noise again. Chatter, eating, general tomfoolery. It was everything was back to normal again.

"Well, that was weird," Ned remarked.

We were all just a bunch of dumb kids, after all. I wasn't sure what else to expect. A panic? Evacuation? Nuanced discussion on politics? No. Everyone just bounced back to their normal lives, because nothing on TV could possibly affect them. At least, that's how the logic goes.

But Peter and I shared a look. This wasn't over yet. Not by a long shot.

As the day wore on, further news broke out about the situation regarding the Chinese Theater. Firstly, there were no bomb fragments found. Thirteen people were confirmed dead, with more injured. Still no word on who the suspect was, although there were eyewitness statements confirming a heavily burned man walking away from the scene — a burned man no one can find, apparently.

But the Mandarin's message wasn't the only thing heating up the airwaves. No, what was far more interesting was Tony Stark's reaction to it.

Apparently, someone he knew got hurt in the explosion last night. Someone from his company, a bodyguard or something. Anyways, an army of reporters sieged him outside a hospital upon leaving, and caught his reply towards some asshole sticking a cellphone in his face.

Caught on live television a few hours after the Mandarin's broadcast, with much less poise and artistry, Tony Stark faced the world head-on. I got a chance to watch a video posted of it from one of the computers in the Lab, while I was supposed to be working on my Excel spreadsheet.

It was that eternal, obnoxious question that sparked it all. "Hey, Mr. Stark, when is somebody gonna kill this guy?"

Tony Stark, on a dozen different television networks, rounded on Douchey Cell-Phone Guy. Douche just shrugged. "Just sayin'.'"

"Is that what you want?" Tony Stark demanded, pulling off his sunglasses and fixing the cameras with a look to freeze Hell over. "Here's a little holiday greeting I've been wanting to send to the Mandarin, I just didn't know how to phrase it till now. My name's Tony Stark and I'm not afraid of
you. I know you're a coward. So, I've decided that you just died, pal. I'm gonna come get the body. There's no politics here, just good old-fashioned revenge. No Pentagon, it's just you and me. And on the off-chance you're a man, here's my home address. 10880 Malibu Point, 90265. I'll leave the door unlocked. That's what you wanted, right?"

Then he grabbed Douche's cellphone, and threw it against a column, smashing it to bits. At the aghast looks, Stark just said, "Sue me."

Then he ducked into his Audi and drove off.

Michelle watched it with me. When it was done, she threw me a look. "Did Tony Stark just give the Mandarin his home address? I thought he was supposed to be smart or something."

"I'd say he's a little emotionally compromised right now," I replied. I wasn't sure why I was defending Tony Stark of all people, but I kind of felt for the guy. He had a friend in the hospital and was being hounded by a bunch of idiots with cameras demanding answers he probably didn't even have. I'd been in a similar situation before. "And let's not forget, he's got an ego the size of Texas."

"Just Texas?" Michelle raised an eyebrow, then snickered. "Whatever. If he gets his dumbass killed in the next 48-hours, don't say I never told you so."

I refused to bet on anything. Tony Stark had Iron Man, right? If anyone could take on the Mandarin, it would be him.

Even after that, people were still asking questions about the attack on the Chinese Theater. No one had found the burned man that walked away. I had only a few guesses as to whom it may be. An Extremis soldier who'd survived the attack.

...But was it?

At this point, I was taking all these supposed Mandarin attacks with a grain of salt. After the boat incident, I had no way to be sure if the explosion was intentional or not. Extremis soldiers were not as stable as they appeared. They could go off without warning, and for once not come back alive. Was this the Mandarin directing an attack, or covering up a mistake, acting like he meant to do that, like someone dealing with a fortunate flub in their artwork.

What I did know, however, was that I had to be ready.

There was no way I could slack off anymore. Not when the Mandarin, and by extension his Extremis soldiers, were so close to finishing what they started. Could they actually attack the President? Would they ever get that far? I didn't want to think so. But I knew better than let myself relax.

That's why I sought out the training room after school for the first time. Midtown had its own room for the football and wrestling players to practice and lift weights — separate from the larger gym, but still open after school.

The training room smelled like sweat and linoleum. There were already some older kids here, doing reps with dumbbells and pull-ups on handlebars. Warm afternoon sunlight filtered in through the windows along one wall, and I found myself a nice secluded corner, where the punching bags were. Midtown used to have a boxing team, but was disbanded a few years ago due to budget cuts and waning interest. These were the remains of their old legacy.

I tried to ignore the few looks I got. The training room had that mentality to it; a sort of brotherhood, where you saw the same small group of people everyday. I was a newcomer. A newcomer amongst
upperclassmen who never gave me much notice before, but now here I was in gym shorts and a tank top.

At least none of them approached me. I had my headphones in, and best resting bitch face on just to make sure. I did my best to ignore them as I wrapped my hands in protective tape. I only had vague memories of doing this before, in the Crucible. They didn't much care for safety or protection, so I never really used gloves or tape when fighting.

That would raise a few eyebrows around here, though. Besides, I figured I'd probably benefit from learning how to do things the right way, the safe way.

Pulling up my hair in a ponytail, I readied myself in front of the punching bag. Balance on my toes, feet shoulder-width apart, hands up and at the ready.

For a moment, I hesitated. Was there a proper way to punch this thing? What if I was too strong? But I didn't want to give it a soft punch either…

Then I imagined Brandt's face on the bag, and slammed my fist into it.

*Wham!*

The bag twisted, swung back, chains creaking. I leaned back, bouncing on my toes, struck again just as the bag came swinging my way again. *Whumph!*

Again, double-tap. Switched my footing, brought my other hand to defend my face, struck out with my left. Always light on my feet. Always moving, never once hesitating before a strike.

And just like that, I remembered what it was like.

A wave of satisfaction washed over me. My breath quickened with excitement. Seeing my enemies made it easier. Made it *invigorating*.

I wasn't taught boxing at the Crucible. The type of hand-to-hand combat I was given was rough and tumble, brawling, no rules, just tricks and tactics to get the upper hand. Boxing was too static, too stiff for what anyone in the Crucible would use. But it was good enough for me. I needed to remind myself the sensation of hitting something with my fist, of the force traveling up my arm, the muscles in my shoulders and back tightening as I strengthened my blows.

It's good practice. That's all it was. Practice. Wouldn't do me much good in a real fight, but it was worth having nonetheless.

I quickened my pace, alternating positions more frequently and striking faster. The thump of the bag became an offbeat drum rhythm in my head.

*You're fighting your shadow.* A voice in my ear.

The Winter Soldier.

*It knows you better than anyone else. When you strike, so do they. When you dodge, they do, too. Be faster. Be better. Never stop.*

A chill up my spine. I struck harder, a sudden fear gripping me. Blood coursed past my ears. Huff of breath. Struck the gut, the face, the hand. Leaned back on one foot and kicked, just for good measure.

"Whoa, ease up there, Rocky!" A voice called out, making me look over my shoulder in surprise. Coach Wilson had just walked past, giving me another strange look. "You sure you don't want some gloves for that?"

"I'm fine," I breathed, shaking my head, and wiping sweat from my mouth. I was hot, panting a little before turning back to the punching bag. I noticed that the sun had gotten lower. How long had I been at this?

"...Well, all right then," Coach Wilson said hesitantly, leaning back a little as I struck the bag again. "Just promise me you won't bust a hole in that, too."

I only gave him a curt nod, not taking my attention away from the bag as I hopped back and forth. Delivered a blow straight to the center. Solar plexus, collapsed.

It continued for a while. After getting attention from Wilson, I wondered if anyone else would approach me. I could see feel eyes on my back. But I told myself to focus on my hits. Make them strong enough to intimidate, keep anyone from interrupting me.

It seemed to work, for a while at least.

I wasn't sure how long I was in there. An hour, two? The other students started to trickle out one by one, as they finished their exercise and went home for the day, hot, sweating, exhausted. But I wasn't getting tired. I was just getting warmed up.

"Oh, there you are,"

I looked around, startled. Peter. I hadn't heard him walk in. He seemed mildly confused to find me here. "I've been looking all over for you. Didn't you get my texts?"

"Oh," I paused, glanced around. "No. I left my phone in m-my bag. Sorry, my bad. I just g-got...carried away."

"Yeah, hitting things sure seems fun," Peter said, raising his eyebrows at me. I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic or not. Probably. He came around to lean against another punching bag, then stumbled when it gave away beneath him. "Sure scared everyone else away."

"What?" I looked behind me, surprised to find the training room completely empty, aside from Coach Wilson, supervising in the corner. He had fallen asleep in a chair, magazine lying open in his lap. "Oh."

"You know," Peter started in that light, all-too-innocent tone. He wrapped his arms around a punching bag, letting it swing him forward so he was only balancing on his toes, his face smushed against the leather. "I heard fresh air's good for the soul."

I threw him a weird look, not pausing in my blows. "Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. That's it's a lot better to exercise outside," Peter added, then cast me a mischievous grin. "And it's fun when you've got a partner to train with."

I paused, grabbing the swinging punching bag, taking a second to catch my breath. Eyeing Peter suspiciously, I fought a smile. "Is that so?"

"So I've heard," Peter just shrugged nonchalantly. His grin got even wider. "But only if you can
"Ooh, is that how it is?"

"Oh, that's how it is, all right," Peter jumped up when I straightened. "So, you up for it?"

"Sure," I said, then cast an uncertain glance around the training room. "But where, exactly? We're not exactly...normal."

"You'll see," Peter replied. "Meet me on the roof in twenty minutes?"

"Students aren't supposed to be up there."

"Exactly."

I finally smiled, threw a towel at him. "All right, then. I'll see you there, Maverick."

✮✮✮

"Whumph!"

"Ow," Peter groaned, wincing after I knocked him flat on his back for the third time in a row. "Okay, not what I had in mind."

"Sorry," I made a face, offering a hand and helping him back to his feet. "You said give me your best, so, uh... I'm trying to hold back a little."

We stood apart from each other, on the roof of Midtown Institute; as Peter had predicted, it was completely deserted. Even better, after school, there was no wandering teachers or hall monitors to catch us. I had been worried of wandering in Mr. Strickland, but luckily hadn't seen him.

We'd only been up here for about a half hour, and I had already trounced Peter several times. I'd flipped him once, then kicked his feet out from under him, and the third time, a single punch laid him flat. From the look on his face, Peter seemed to be questioning his judgment of this whole idea.

"Only a little?" Peter rubbed the back of his head, squinting at me out of the corner of his eye.

I shrugged helplessly. It wasn't that Peter was bad. He was stronger, faster than me, much lighter on his feet. But he lacked any skill at fighting. I had to show him how to keep his thumb on the outside of his fist, so he wouldn't break it when punching someone. Beginner's stuff, and yet...

"Sorry, when you told me you've been at this since April, I assumed you'd have less experience than me," I said, stepping back and gazing out over the city block. Beyond the school was the football field, the gym, then apartment buildings further out. "Six months, more or less, right? Fighting crime? It adds up."

"Yeah, well," Peter huffed a little, coming to stand next to me with his arms crossed. "I wasn't training to be Spider-Man for two years. Don't think I ever fought as much as you did. It's mostly, you know, stopping bike thieves, purse snatchers, helping out with the occasional fire...not, uh, battling against international terrorist plots, or being trained by legendary assassins. Different strokes for different folks, I guess."
I chuckled a little. "That's one way of putting it. You went pretty hard on me the other night, though. At the docks."

"Oh," Peter ducked his head, embarrassed. "Yeah, um, about that...I just — after everything that happened with you, when you got back, it really...it really got me worked up. And then the Brandt thing a-and the FBI and — well, I got scared, okay? More than I realized. I'm sorry, Mia, really. I swear I'm not like that. I don't want to be."

"I know, Mav," I said, throwing him a half-smile. "Just surprised me, that's all. You almost had me on the ropes there."

"Almost?" Peter gaped at me, offended. "If it weren't for you showing your stupid face, Goose, I would've kicked your ass!"

"Oh, please," I snorted, tossing my head back. "The only reason you got that far was because I already knew it was you, and I didn't want to hurt you."

"That's funny, you didn't seem to have any problem with that two minutes ago."

I took a swing at him, playful but still mildly threatening — only Peter dodged the first one, then ducked under the second time, spinning around and snapping his wrist. Before I knew what happened, my hand was wrapped in web, and with one good yank, I was pulled right off my feet.

I hit the ground on my side but turned it into a roll, pulling my arm back as Peter tried to drag me. I got my legs back under me, then twisted back, hard, pulling on the cord of web. Peter yelped as he slipped, and I launched forward, preparing for impact.

He somehow managed to twist in the air, slipping right overhead. The air was punched out of my lungs as he landed both feet on my back, before flipping off.

I stumbled when my planned hit never made it, rolling forward on my shoulders before coming back to a crouched position, finding myself facing off Peter, also low on the ground.

My hands were tied together, a grin on my face. "You cheated."

Peter just gave me a crooked smile, like I was being ridiculous. "Oh, yeah, like you're the type to play fair."

"Touché." I grinned, then cut the web with the knife I kept in my boot.

Perhaps anticipating my attack, Peter launched himself at me first. Startled, I threw myself forward and to the side, ducking his kick, my shoes skidding in the frosty gravel. Peter backflipped off an exhaust vent — Thwip thwip!

I hadn't even completely stopped before I had to dodge again, globs of web flying over my head. "What even is that?"

As I went, I nearly tripped over Peter's backpack — then double-backed and picked it up.

Something must have finally clicked with Peter. Maybe it was knowing I wasn't going to hold back, so he wouldn't, either. Maybe it had something to do with his web-shooters, which I had no reliable defense for. Maybe he figured out he just had to outmaneuver me long enough, until I either gave up or figured out another way to hit him from afar.

Whatever it was, it finally got fun.
"Just a compound I cooked up in Chem class," Peter grinned, looking pleased at his own handiwork. That smile quickly faded, however, when he followed me, trying to land a punch — only for his arm to get caught in the loop of his backpack as I swung it around. Then I twisted it, hard, and flipped Peter on his back. "Oof!"

Peter, still on his back, managed to smile again as he held up his wrists, at the web-shooters partially hidden in his sleeves. "A sticky resin that seals instantly on impact, with six times the tensile strength of steel. It's meant to simulate actual spider silk."

Standing over him, I was actually impressed. "Seriously? That thing could stop bullets."

"It could," Peter conceded, but didn't look convinced. Before I could ask, he rocked back on his shoulders, kicking up his legs. I just managed to stumble back without getting hit, as Peter jumped back to his feet from his prone position.

I tried to sweep his legs out from under him, but Peter leapt back, bounding off a one-handed back handspring before landing on top of a nearby fuse box. He balanced on the precariously narrow surface just on the balls of his feet, hardly wavering, like some sort of deranged cat. "But I haven't figured out a way to weave it into fabric. It's just too...sticky."

"And you didn't think to patent it?"

"It's in the process!" Peter threw up his hands, then dropped them. "I don't know, I want to keep this to myself for now. I don't want — I don't want the wrong people using this stuff. I've barely even figured out what to do with it, I definitely don't want some psycho getting his hands on this."

"Understandable,"

Probably feeling confident in his ability to dance around me, Peter hopped up onto some exposed piping, walking across them like a balance beam as I circled around, trying to find a good opening.

"Goose, I would die if Mr. Stark let me on the Avengers," Peter said, spinning in place and looking up at the sky in wistful daydreaming. "But he says I'm not ready yet. He said I should just stick to being your friendly, neighborhood Spider-Man for now."

"What, no internship as Iron Man's sidekick, Mav?" I teased, and nearly took a bolt to the head for that. I ducked, skipping away laughing.

"Pfft, no," Peter threw me a peeved look. "Spider-Man isn't anyone's sidekick. That only happens in comic books."

"What about you?" he asked, as I contemplated my next move.

"What about me?" I asked back, before mantling up the pipes. I wasn't as graceful as Peter, but I fast enough to make him stumble back a little.

"Do you want to be a part of the Avengers? Meet Captain America, do stuff like him?"

I got to my feet, shrugged my shoulders with a dry huff. "I don't know, I'm not sure if being a 'superhero' is really my thing. Going around the world to save people at the drop of a hat? I'm not going to have a normal life anymore."

Peter tilted his head at that. "We don't exactly have normal lives to begin with. You think you can get it back? I mean, is that really what you want? Because I'm getting a different feeling, right now, with what we're doing here."
That had me silent for a moment, too long thinking it over. Peter had a point and I wasn't sure I wanted to admit it. Did I want a normal life? Because I had enjoyed it up to the moment my paranoia couldn't handle it anymore. And this? This was fun. The blood pumping, the adrenalin, the action. Even when my life was in danger, I found myself gravitating towards it more than I probably should. And I didn't know what that meant.

My heart skipped a beat. The thought actually scared me. Did I actually *like* having my life in danger?

After a long moment, I decided I didn't like this anymore and I lunged forward, throwing my arm back for a fist. Peter dodged, but my blow was a feint for the following kick to the chest. My foot landed and Peter stumbled back, only to come to the edge of the pipes. Yet he didn't fall off — no, instead, his feet stuck to the surface as his body went horizontal in mid-air, standing on the side of the pipes like a poltergeist from a horror movie. It would've been disconcerting if it wasn't Peter's stupid face grinning at me.

Still, I was startled long enough for Peter to recover and launch himself back up. *Thwip!*

It was largely telegraphed, and Peter flipped right over me, hands grazing my shoulders for a second as he went over my head. He landed with the grace of a ballerina on the other side, spinning around to grin at me. "Ha! Nice try."

But I'd meant for him to see it, for the blow to miss — just long enough to distract Peter, so he wouldn't press me for an answer. I keeled over, hands on my knees, pausing to catch my breath. In an attempt to change the topic, I asked, "So what's the d-deal with you and Tony Stark?"

"What? What do you mean?"

"I mean, it just seems you two are, like, weirdly close," I said, turning around to face him. "How often do you talk to him?"

"Well, I swing around sometimes when he's in town," Peter shrugged, walking along the pipes, back to me. "It's easier than calling him, he's never picked up the phone. No wait, that's not true, he did once. When you sent the message to Ned, that's when I called him."

I was about to be angry, before I remembered that I already knew Tony Stark knew about me, from my interview with him. Instead, I found something else to be concerned about. "You told Tony Stark about me, but not Aunt May?"

Peter's back was still facing me. His shoulders hunched up to his ears as he ducked his head. "I... I don't know. Mr. Stark didn't lose you and Hedy and Uncle Ben. It was...it was just easier, in a way. Like, he was the only one who could be rational about this? Not that he really knew what was going on, I guess that wasn't fair of me. And I didn't want to hurt May."

I was silent for a long moment, studying the pipes beneath my feet. The chipped white paint crackled beneath my boots. The setting sun illuminated our breaths, turning them into golden, hazy clouds of fire. A soft breeze past through, the air silent except for the distant sounds of traffic.

"I guess he helped you a lot, didn't he?"

"Yeah, you know," Peter inhaled sharply through his nose, glancing at me over his shoulder as he rubbed the back of his neck. "It's not — It's not like I *need* him, you know? Mr. Stark's cool and all, but I don't need his help or anything."

"Uh-huh," I said, pursing my lips but not pressing Peter. I knew his all-too-innocent tone. "He must
"You think so?" Peter flashed me an eager smile, before quickly smoothing it over, trying to maintain a poker face. "Oh, yeah, Mr. Stark, you know, he's busy. Like I said last time, he's still dealing with the Incident. I guess he has, I don't know, anxiety or something."

I had a sneaking feeling Tony Stark would have a lot more than just anxiety after hand-delivering a nuclear missile through an alien portal and nearly dying in the process.

"You should find Steve Rogers," Peter said suddenly, making me jolt a little. "I could ask Mr. Stark —"

"Please don't," I said immediately, my hands clenching with nerves. I glanced away, embarrassed by my sudden reaction. "I'll find him when I'm ready. I don't think he knows yet and I really don't want him finding out from Tony Stark of all people…"

"Oh, yeah," Peter winced at the thought. "Good point."

I cuffed him across the ear. "I promise to tell you, though, when I do."

"Really? You think he'll give an autograph?"

"I'd rather disown m-myself than ask."

"Hey, who's up here?" A sudden shout made the both of us jump and whirl around. Strickland had just come up through the door, flashlight in hand. He hadn't spotted us yet, but apparently heard our voices. "The roof is off limits, you damn punks! I know you're here!"

The both of us stared at Strickland, frozen.

Then Peter called, "First one home is a rotten egg!" And ran for the ledge.

"Hey!" I spun after him, caught off guard. He'd already jumped off. "PETER!"

Around seven o'clock, while I was lying in bed, reading my AP history book, I got a text from Michelle.

*Told you so.*

She didn't provide any context, so I had no idea what she was talking about. Then a few seconds later, Peter burst into my room.

The door banged open, scaring me so bad I nearly fell off the bed. There Peter stood, in the doorway, breathing hard and skin completely white. He stared at me, face stricken.

"The news," he gasped. "It's on the news."

"What?" I asked, utterly baffled and a little frightened, but Peter just turned around without a word and stumbled back into his room. With no other recourse, I followed him.
"Look," he whispered, pointing at the TV on his dresser.

It was playing a live news broadcast — unusual, because Peter never watched the news from his room. But I didn't question it when I realized what I was watching.

Malibu cliffs, the dark Pacific Ocean under a setting sun. The sky glistened red, smoke rising from wreckage of what used to be a house.

Not just any house.

Tony Stark's mansion.

Cast to rubble.

"What you see here is what remains of the attack on Tony Stark's private home," A newswoman said, her voice muffled by the helicopter in the background. "This is only hours after Mr. Stark challenged the Mandarin on live TV. It seems the attack began with three helicopters, hijacked from others news corporations, approached the structure and opened fire with what appeared to be missiles..."

Peter gripped his bedpost, eyes shining as he shook his head, as if this wasn't real. "No, no, no…"

"...there are no sightings of Iron Man…" The woman continued, her voice becoming uncertain. "...number of deaths unconfirmed, but it seems Tony Stark was still within his home when it collapsed into the ocean. He has yet to be recovered..."

Peter collapsed onto his bed, clutching his stomach like he was about to be sick.

I could only watch in shock. Bold words scrolled along the bottom of the screen.

MANDARIN ATTACK: TONY STARK DEAD.
more art ;P

http://rebelcolumbia.tumblr.com/
Chapter Summary

Part Seven: BOOM!

Tony Stark is dead, and the Mandarin remains unchallenged in his continued terrorizing of the United States.

But the fight isn’t over yet. Peter is convinced Tony isn’t dead,

And Mia knows the Mandarin’s secret. But to stop him,

the two must break a few rules, and tread ground they’ve never crossed before.

Will they ever make it back? Can they survive the great battle that looms ahead?

It’s been three days, despite Peter's hopes, Tony Stark had not come back from the dead.

Even worse, it was now finals week. The air was tense at school between our last lessons and study breaks. The Mandarin had just killed Iron Man. An Avenger. No word from the rest of the team on
what they were doing, if anything at all. Stark Industries had yet to make a statement. Their CEO, Pepper Potts, seemed to have had gone underground for her own safety.

All that was left was to watch the live cast as workers dug up the rubble that remained of Stark's Malibu mansion. Every hour they were pulling out massive hunks of concrete, the ruins of his private sports-car collection, bits and pieces of robotic parts. But no Tony Stark. No Iron Man. Was he still somewhere in the wreckage? Had ocean currents carried him away?

I couldn't really focus on it, as much as I wanted to. The Mandarin was dangerous, but so was not passing my last tests. Mine were modified to the material I had learned so far in the semester, but they were still difficult, and it wasn't easy studying under the stress of knowing my life, too, might also be in danger. If the Mandarin could kill Tony Stark, what was to stop him or the Extremis soldiers from killing me, too?

But I hadn't seen hide nor hair of them since the boat explosion. Maybe they really had left.

Since the night Tony Stark died, Peter had barely spoken a word to me. The one time he did, it had been to give me a wild look over lunch, his eyes wide as he whispered, "He's gotta be okay, right? I mean, he can't be dead. No one can just kill Iron Man like that. They just can't."

I was so stunned I couldn't think of how to respond. Ned, sitting next to him, looked equally alarmed by this sudden outburst.

"Peter," Ned winced, glancing at me, then back at him. "I don't...I don't think Tony Stark is coming back. You saw what they did to his house. That's not — no one could've survived that."

"But he's Tony Stark!" Peter snapped, slamming his fists on the table as if this refuted Ned's entire argument.

"He's still just a guy," I pointed out, keeping my voice low, hoping not to upset him further. "He's only human."

Peter gave me a look akin to betrayal, before turning his attention back to his meal in sullen, glowering silence. Ned and I exchanged flinching looks. That had not gone over well. Peter ignored us completely for the rest of the day.

He seemed lost; at school, he wandered the halls, expression hollow, eyes empty and distant, moving with a sort of forced automation. Didn't raise his hand in class. Was the last to enter and the last to leave. At home, he stayed locked up in his room, only coming out briefly for food. That is, unless he was masquerading as Spider-Man. I wasn't sure how. Everything about him seemed sluggish now. It was like all the energy had just been sucked out of him.

It was bad enough that Aunt May started to notice. On the third morning after Stark's death, Peter had left for school without even pausing for breakfast. Just straight from his bedroom to the front door, not waiting for me, or even saying goodbye. I was still waiting for my toast to finish when I just watched him shut the door behind him, the bang like a slap to the face.

"Peter?" Aunt May called after him, but was too late. She paused over the frying pan, glancing down at the frying eggs that would now go uneaten. To me, she said, "He's been so quiet. Did something happen? Is that Flash boy bothering him at school again?"

"No," I said, frowning down at my hands as I leaned against the counter. I wasn't sure how I could explain it to Aunt May without making Peter out to be crazy. "It's...it's about Tony Stark. Ever since the attack..."
"Oh," Aunt May said, her voice soft. Something flickered in her face, and she was silent for a long moment. I studied her, waiting with growing trepidation. She seemed to be holding onto something, and I was afraid of what it might be.

At last, she sighed. "He was always so in awe of that Stark. I never liked him much, but Peter, oh, Peter nearly worshiped Tony. You should've seen his face when he got that internship. It was like Christmas and his birthday all wrapped up into one. I hadn't seen him that happy since Ben—"

Aunt May cut herself off, her head jerking down sharply. A quick huff, then she recovered and added, "I can't imagine what Peter's going through right now. Could you do me a favor, Mia?"

I nodded.

"He just — he never talks about it, you know?" May continued, turning off the stove and running a hand through her dark hair. She passed me an anxious smile, wobbly at the corners. Her eyes were oddly shiny behind her glasses. "I-don't think he'll talk to me. Could you ask him? O-or just check on him, for me, okay? I need to know he's all right. I'm afraid he'll spiral."

"Yeah, I can do that," I said, offering a smile in return, but it was just as uncertain. Spiral? I hadn't been there when Uncle Ben died, but I knew from Peter's account that he hadn't taken it well, to say the least. I couldn't imagine what it must have looked like from May's perspective. But her worry made me see this event in a new light. What if it happened again? What if it was happening right now?

"Thank you," May laid a hand on my shoulder and gave me an appreciative squeeze. "I know it's a lot to ask of you. I really shouldn't."

I frowned again, not knowing why she'd say that. "No, it's fine, Aunt May. It doesn't bother me."

Except it did. Aunt May had the advantage of authority whenever there were serious discussions to be had. Me and Peter? We were on equal footing, various superpowers notwithstanding. I couldn't command Peter to listen to me anymore than he could of me.

Still, I made a promise, and I had to try.

So that evening, after yet another tense day at school, I knocked on the door-frame to Peter's room, calling his name. The door was open, just a crack, and I peered in.

Peter was hunched over his desk, working diligently on some equations in a notebook. It looked like a tornado had hit his room — stuff was everywhere. Clothes on the floor, backpack spilled out on his bed, papers and textbooks from every class splayed out on his desk, and what looked like dozen tabs open on his computer browser. I couldn't help but stare a little. How could he focus like this?

"Yeah?" Peter's voice snapped me back, and I realized I hadn't heard his first reply. He was now looking at me, looking vaguely irritated, mostly tired. There were bags under his eyes. If he hadn't been going out at night as Spider-Man, then he hadn't been getting much sleep, either.

I tried not to look too concerned when I asked, "Can I, uh, come in?" It felt required now. Peter didn't look as welcoming as he usually did.

"Why?" he asked, proving my point.

"I just want to make sure you're okay, that's all," I said, stumbling over the uncomfortable, stilted words. I wanted to kick myself. This is what I get for parroting Aunt May. She always sounded so natural, so sincere when she said it. Not that I didn't care, just that I definitely wasn't as talented.
"You've been, um, acting a little...weird, lately."

"Oh," Peter frowned down at his paperwork, doing a slight double-take as if just now realizing the mess he'd created. Then he nodded once, leaning back in his chair. "Yeah, I guess."

I took this as an affirmative, and slipped inside, quietly closing the door behind me. I had a sneaking suspicion that Aunt May would eavesdrop, so decided to choose my next words carefully. "You've been wrecked ever since what happened to Tony Stark. And we have finals and — I just want to make sure you aren't tearing yourself apart."

"Tearing myself apart?" Peter repeated, then scoffed. "What? Me? I'm fine, Mia. I'm just studying."

I glanced over at his desk. Although my back was still resting against the door, I could read his notes. I recognized the shape of chemical formulas, then threw Peter a skeptical look. "I thought you already finished your AP Chem report. What are you working on?"

Peter just blinked, surprised, before letting out a frustrated noise. He leaned over and flipped his notebook back, hiding it from sight. "Pssh, what are you, Sherlock Holmes? It's none of your business."

I had a hard time reigning in a glare at the snappy response. "What is it, another one of your — remembering Aunt May, I quickly censored my speech, "— special formulas?"

Peter eyes were focused on the floor as he mumbled, "...Maybe."

"Don't you think you have better things to be spending your time on right now?" I asked, raising an eyebrow. I jerked my chin at his history textbook. "You got a B- on your Civil War test."

Now he was starting to look particularly annoyed. "Are you here to ask me if I'm all right, or just to nag me?"

I rolled my eyes, which was decidedly insensitive on my part since I was still doing my best to be nice (and apparently failing). "C'mon, Peter, you know what I mean. You're just finding ways to distract yourself ever since Stark died —"

"He's not dead!" Peter blurted.

"— What?" I jolted a little, caught off guard.

Peter clenched the armrests of his chair, gazing up with a half-stricken, half-guilty look on his face. "Tony Stark isn't dead, Mia. He can't be."

That's when it hit me. No wonder Peter was like this; he was still convinced Tony Stark could come back from utter annihilation. A part of me understood; how many people can you lose in a year? Peter hadn't known Stark for long but it was clear the man had a great impact on his life when I wasn't here. I felt bad, underestimating just how much this hurt Peter. How much more could he take before he broke completely?

My arms dropped to my sides, and I couldn't hide the wince in my voice. "Oh, Peter…"

"Don't say that! I'm not stupid," Peter snapped, hearing the pity in my voice and appreciating it about as much as I would. "I know it's crazy! That doesn't change the fact that I know he's still alive. The same way I knew you still were."

"What?" If this was his idea of guilting me, he had better try again. As much sympathy as I felt, I
was not about to join his side. "Peter, I sent you proof that I was still alive. I was on a freaking
magazine! Do you have anything more to go on than wild dreams?"

"N-no," Peter stammered with rising uncertainty. He scowled down, saying, "Look, it doesn't have
to make sense, okay?"

"You're not making any sense. Even if he was alive, what are you going to do about it?" I demanded,
throwing up my hands. "I don't want him dead, either, but Tony Stark isn't coming back. I know it
sounds bad, but it's not the end of the world. The Avengers still exist. If anyone can do something, its
them. Right now, you...you just gotta keep your head down here, okay? We have finals and the last
thing you need is failing classes."

Peter didn't say anything, just continued to glower into his lap, unmoving.

I heaved a sigh, falling back against the door. "I'm sorry, Peter. I want to believe. But we don't have
proof. And to be honest, we have other things to worry about."

"Yeah, I know," he muttered, dejectedly toeing a fallen pencil. "I just...I just feel useless."

There was no way to tell him how much I knew how that felt. "Aunt May's w-worried about you,
too. I'm not trying to be mean. I just want you to be okay."

Peter nodded, working his jaw but appearing to have surrendered. He offered no more
counterarguments, and after a long silence of not meeting each other's eyes, I decided to leave. With
nothing more to add, I grabbed the doorknob behind me, and slipping out the door.

✮✮✮

I did my best to focus on studying, even as the first day of finals passed and I found myself thinking
more and more on Tony Stark than usual. I still felt bad about it. I knew what Peter was doing would
be something I'd do. In the middle of my AP English exam, I caught myself in the middle of a mental
argument, deciding on the validity of Tony Stark's survival.

Point: Police hadn't found a body yet.

Counterpoint: Bodies lost at sea are rarely, if ever, found.

Point: He might've flown away on in a suit.

Counterpoint: Footage was limited. The actual news copters flew away when the explosions
happened, and there are no eyewitness reports of any Iron Man sightings in the past week.

Point: Tony Stark may have invented a suit with flying capabilities. Alternatively, flying at night
would give him cover. It was already sunset when the mansion was attacked.

Counterpoint: Then why hasn't he met up with the Avengers, or proven he's still alive?

Point: Maybe he's hurt or couldn't make it very far. Or he's smart and knows to keep his head down,
for once.

Counterpoint: Or maybe he's actually dead, because no way would a man like Stark not contact
someone to let them know he's alive.
...And on and on in circles, when I should be writing my short thesis on Greek tragedies. Tony Stark was a Greek tragedy. Couldn't I write about that?

It was stupid, is all. I gave myself a headache worrying about it, and was relieved when the bell rang and I could leave for study period in the library. I was joined by Michelle, who'd handed in her English test before mine, and seemed mighty smug as she watched the teacher read it with an increasingly alarmed expression.

If she thought I was distracted, she didn't let on. In the library, Michelle turned to reading (of course). She had her feet kicked up on the table, only bringing them down when the librarian, Mrs. Corral passed, just to put them back up when she left. This time, she had a gossip magazine, a bit unusual considering her opinions on mainstream media. But Michelle seemed fully engrossed, cackling insidiously over an article titled *KIA FOREVER*. I decided not to ask what it was about.

Still, as I chewed on my pen and tried to figure out my Chem work around swirling thoughts on conspiracy, I didn't expect Michelle to be the first to break the silence.

"So," Michelle started, flicking a page in the magazine, her eyes not lifting from the page. "How's your cuz doing?"

The question took me by surprise. I looked up from my homework, brow furrowing. "What, you mean Peter?"

Michelle glanced up at me over her magazine, then back down again. Her face was composed with deceptive neutrality. "Yeah, him, the loser. He's okay, right?"

"...For the most part," I said after a moment, still studying Michelle with some amount of suspicion. She'd never asked me about Peter before, certainly not about how he was doing. "He's still taking Stark's death pretty hard. He's getting over it, though. He'll get better once finals are over, probably."

"Oh," Michelle said, her answer oddly brief. She still didn't look at me, and her eyes seemed focused on a single spot in her magazine — glazed over in thought.

I returned to my work. I wasn't sure what Michelle had against Peter, or why she was suddenly asking about him now. Was she considering saving some casual bullying for later?

Barely a minute had passed before Michelle suddenly spoke again.

Setting down her magazine with a slap, Michelle sat up straight and asked, "I'm just worried, okay?"

"...I didn't ask." I looked up from my work, now getting a little less surprised by these rather nonsensical outbursts. "But sure. I get it."

Apparently not hearing me, Michelle continued, her fists clenching on the table. "Look, I'm not a sap, okay? But it's really hard seeing him like this. Peter's usually such a, you know, an idiot! A goofball idiot! I like him that way! Not like this. This is the point where friends do something."

My eyebrows had nearly flown off my forehead. "Peter's your friend?"

Michelle froze for a moment, her mouth gaping, before she shook herself over. She recovered, flicking her hand dismissively and blowing a raspberry. "Pfft, what? No! I'm just saying, speaking on behalf of his *actual* friends, they should be concerned, is all. People that care about him. Not me, of course."

I leaned back in my seat, fighting a smile pulling at my lips. Nearly failing, I quickly covered my
mouth, pretending to be seriously considering her answer and not trying to laugh. "Oh, uh, okay. Yeah, no, you're right, Michelle. He's definitely not your friend."

"No, of course not," Michelle nodded once, hard. She folded her arms as if that settled it, but couldn't quite meet my eyes. "He doesn't call me MJ."

"MJ?"

"Yeah, MJ. Only my friends call me that. And Peter's not my friend."

I glanced to the side, unsure of what to do with this information. I didn't know Michelle's friends called her MJ. In fact, I wasn't sure MJ had any other friends at all. Wait, was I her friend? Could I call her MJ?

In the end, that wasn't what I was really thinking about. For someone who wasn't friends with Peter, Michelle was trying pretty hard to convince me; until now I'd never questioned her dislike of Peter. Deciding to glide over it for the moment, I said, "Well, I spoke to Peter the other day, right? I convinced him that Tony Stark was dead, that there was no proof. I think that should help him focus. Are you — are you really that worried about him, MJ?"

Immediately, Michelle replied, "No. Nope. Not at all."

Which was great, because I thought she might be angry at me for calling her MJ. Maybe I was her friend after all. Huh.

Feeling stupid for my insecurity, I just smiled and added, "I didn't think so."

Michelle looked like she was about to continue, until a commotion behind her caught our attention. We both looked around, surprised, when none other than Peter came barreling around a corner, past some shelves and a very disgruntled-looking Mrs. Corral, who had to swerve to avoid him and the books stacked in her arms. "Mia, there you are!"

"No running in the library!" She hissed at him, but Peter beelined straight for me, completely oblivious.

"Peter?" I asked, rather alarmed. Speak of the devil. If I thought Peter looked bad before, he definitely wasn't doing great now. His face had gone deathly pale, eyes wild, breathing frantic. "Jesus, are you okay? What are you doing here?"

"I'm looking for you!" Peter said, dropping both hands hard onto the tabletop, catching his breath. He glanced over, did a double-take at Michelle, as if just noticing her. "Oh, hi, Michelle."

Michelle flipped him off without looking up from her magazine. She had returned to it promptly as soon as she recognized Peter, as if we'd hadn't just been talking about him a second ago.

Peter turned back to me without even blinking. Several locks of hair were hanging in front of his eyes, not helping with the deranged thing he had going on. Several other kids nearby, also studying, were starting to stare. "Mia, I need to you to promise me something. Right now. I need to tell you something and I need you to promise me, right now, that you're not going to blow me off."

"Wait, about what?" I paused, looked him up and down. "...Aren't you supposed to be in AP Bio right now?"

"Yeah, so? Who cares!" Peter scoffed, shaking his head. He was speaking too loud for the library, and I hunched my shoulders at every syllable. "I can't tell you, you have to promise me first!"
"Okay, fine!" I threw up a hand, getting more and more weirded out by the second. I had no idea what had Peter so riled up, but now I was curious enough to agree to just about anything. "Just lower your voice, man, before you get us in trouble. What's the big deal?"

As soon as I asked, Peter scrambled to pull something from his pockets. I just now noticed he had his backpack with him. Had he ditched class entirely? Didn't he have a test? What was so urgent to pull him out of that? Dread came over me, and I wasn't sure I wanted to find out.

Peter slammed his phone on the table with a loud bang. He looked me dead in the eye. "Tony Stark is still alive."

I stared at him, aghast. Then I flopped back into my seat, hand sliding down my face. "Peter, I thought we talked about this."

"Hey, you promised!" Peter jabbed a finger at me. "You said I needed proof, so here it is, proof!"

"That wasn't supposed to be a challenge!" I snapped, straightening up a little. I had no idea Peter would take it that way, and now it was too late to change my words. "Peter, he's dead! There's nothing you can do!"

"Oh yeah?" Peter huffed, then shoved his phone at me again. "Then explain how Tony Stark just called me five minutes ago."

Wait. What?

I was actually speechless for a moment. Even Michelle was surprised, actually looking up from her magazine to outright stare at Peter, when she had been doing so surreptitiously before. We shared a look. Was he serious?

"Look!" Peter said again, turning his lock-screen on.

And there, right before my eyes, was proof.

Tony Stark - Missed Call

"No fucking way," I said, leaning over the phone to get a closer look, making sure I read it right. I didn't believe it. Even Michelle looked interested now. But I didn't know what to say.

"I have his private cell phone number," Peter said, sounding victorious. He crossed his arms, and for the first time in what must have been a week, he smiled. "That's him. Tony Stark is alive."

"What did he say?" Michelle asked before I could.

Peter glanced at her, surprised, before his shoulders started to rise with uncertainty. "He didn't. I didn't have a chance to pick up. He only rang twice before it ended."

"He cancelled the call," I said, more to myself than the group. I kept studying the phone, my finger tapping the table in concentration. I had to admit, this was pretty interesting. Still, my skeptical side came through. "Are you sure it's him, though? Maybe someone else has his phone."

"Who?" Peter demanded, anger rising at my doubt. "Who else would have it?"

"Peter, it's a phone, not a DNA sample. Anyone could have gotten their hands on it. They might have recovered it from the scene."

"So, what?" he scowled, crossing his arms. "I'm not supposed to do anything, is that right? I'm just
supposed to ignore it, pretend it never happened? What if he was calling for help?"

I found that so incredible I almost laughed. "Peter, why would he call you?"

That probably wasn't the nicest thing to say. Peter just held my gaze for a long moment, fists clenching, before he reached over and snatched the phone off the table, pivoting on his heel and walking away. "I don't know! But I can't do nothing."

"Peter, come on."

"No, Mia, you come on!" Peter retorted, spinning back around to point at me. His eyes were red. His hands shook. "If this was me, if I died and it seemed like a sure thing, that I was never coming back, and suddenly I called your phone. How far would you go to find out what happened?"

I stiffened in my seat. The answer was slow to come at first, but taut with anger. "To the ends of the earth."

I had been the one to call once. I had been the one desperately searching for help, needing the one person I could trust to find me. That was Peter. Was he the same thing for Tony Stark?

Peter dropped his pointed finger, letting his arm swing back to his side with a huff. "Exactly."

Michelle threw me a look. I returned it; could I really admit defeat? If I agreed to help Peter, then there was no turning back. I knew how hard he'd go, and I knew I'd only make him better. Aunt May would be pissed that I'd be enabling him, which is exactly what I would be doing. If Tony Stark was truly alive, then he was in danger. And if we went looking for him, then we'd run straight into it.

This could only end in utter disaster.

Which is why I picked up my stuff and slung on my backpack. "God dammit, fine. Let's go."
Thank you for the reviews! Just letting everyone know I'm fine, I've started school again, but I'm still doing my best to stick to my schedule.

"I think we should start with pinging his location. If he's hurt, if it's bad —"

"But we can't do that on any old computer. We need one that has the right permissions, that has access to Stark's private IP —"

"What? You can't just hack into it?"

"Into a Stark phone? Peter, I can't get into anything made after 1994. You think I have any idea what's in this hunk of glass —"

"— I don't know, I just figured it'd be pretty quick —"

"— Hacking isn't magic, Peter. Besides, I don't hack, it's not the Eighties —"

A bellow interrupted us mid-argument. "AND WHERE THE HECK DO YOU TWO LOSERS THINK YOU'RE GOING?"

Peter and I came to a dead stop. We were heading out the school front doors; My hand was already on the handle. Cringing, Peter and I turned around to face none other than Mr. Strickland, fuming behind us, his bald head reflecting the lights from above. Another thing I didn't like about Midtown: Mr. Strickland had graduated with us. Apparently, he got a promotion while I had been gone. And now we were all the worse for it.

Peter started. "We were just going to get some —"

"We're leaving," I cut him off, earning a surprised look from both of them. I continued regardless. "We finished our tests for today, we just want to go home and study."

"You mean you're cutting class?"

"What?" Peter yelped at the wild accusation. "No, Mr. Strickland, we're already finished. There's nothing left for us to do —"

"So, what, you think you can just leave whenever you want to?" Mr. Strickland demanded, hands on his hips. "You think you own this school, don't you, Parker? Well, I see right through you and that hair of yours. Maybe you should learn to appreciate your time here. Detention, both of you!"
Peter and I groaned in unison. As Strickland jabbed a finger behind him, ushering us to go, I had a brief moment of uncertainty. Was I really going to let this guy tell me what to do? Wasn't Tony Stark's life at stake? We should be leaving ASAP, not wasting it after school.

But Peter was already shuffling back, hand ruffling his hair self-consciously. Detention it was, then.

I'd later *would* appreciate it, but not in the way Mr. Strickland intended. When the final bell rang and the both of us remained in Strickland's classroom with other sullen degenerates, I took the opportunity to think over our next step.

"Okay, fine, we can't hack the phone," Peter whispered; Strickland's detention was meant to be entirely silent, and he kept his head bowed over his book, speaking out of the corner of his mouth. He didn't have to raise his voice too much; I was sure at this point that we both had heightened senses, including hearing. "But how do we do it then, computer wizard?"

"Well, we need to find a computer attached to Stark's private server. That will be connected to his phone, right?" I asked, glancing at him out of the corner of my eye. My left foot tapped impatiently on the floor. My only desire was to get up and move, even if I didn't know where I was going yet.

"Well, he has locations all over the world," Peter replied, thumbing back and forth between the same two pages of his history textbook. We had already taken that test and he seemed frustrated to be stuck with it. "His main hub would've been his home in Malibu. But he'd have others. The nearest one would be in Stark Tower, in his private office on the penthouse floor…"

The both of us paused, then looked at each other. We both had access to Stark Tower. It was less than a mile away. We knew how to get in and to get out.

Too bad there was no way we could ever reach it.

"We have to get inside," Peter added immediately. "As soon as we get out of here."

"How do you suggest we do that?" I hissed, hunching up my shoulders as Mr. Strickland's probing eyes scanned the room. We remained silent until the room was clear, then continued, "They're not going to just let us walk into his office. Your phone story won't convince anyone."

I wasn't entirely sure if that was true, but we had already decided not to tell the police — at this point, I had no idea how the Mandarin operated, where he had his spies, but I wasn't about to take any risks. If the Mandarin could hack international airwaves, then being able to listen in on police chatter probably would be a walk in the park.

"I've gotten in before, I know a way," Peter replied, and he was starting to twitch, too, excited by this new headway. "When we leave here, we can head straight out, and get there before dark —"

"What? No way," I cut him off, shaking my head imperceptibly. "I'm not going there during work hours, it's too dangerous. We go at night. It'll give us better cover. After school, we just go home and pretend everything's fine, and then sneak out when Aunt May's asleep. She'll ask too many questions if we stay out late after school."

Peter let out a sound of frustration. "But it'll take too long, Mia!"

"We don't have a choice! We're not going to be of any help to Tony Stark if we end up arrested for trespassing. If he's survived this long, then he can wait a little bit longer. I cast Peter a worried glance, my brows pinching together. "Look, we can't rush into this, okay? We have to keep our heads on straight. If we're going to do this, then we have to do it right. You get it?"
"Yeah, I get it…" He heaved a sigh, slumping in defeat. Pencil tapped against the table, a sharp staccato. "So, you really want to break into Stark Tower? Is that what we're doing?"

"I guess so," I shrugged. "Why?"

"I dunno," Peter tilted his head, thoughtful. "I guess I never imagined you to be the first to suggest doing something against the rules. It's usually my dumb ass that gets us into these situations."

"Well, I've already committed a number of illegal activities so far," I muttered, barely containing a smirk as I glanced at Strickland fumbling with his smartphone. "Might as well add breaking and entering to that list, too."

"I still can't believe you won't hack into it," Peter muttered.

I had to restrain an eye-roll. It wasn't that I wouldn't, it was that I couldn't. My interest in computers lied largely in pre-Internet models and forms of coding, mostly from the 70s and 80s. Not just because Peter's old Commodore used to be the only thing I could use, but because I loved learning about them. It was like studying history, just with computers. "I can't help it, I just know the obsolete stuff."

"Why? That's not very useful."

"Oh, I'm sorry." I drawled, sarcastic. "I didn't realize I had to consider real-world applications of my personal interests before I started another hobby. I'll be sure to remember that next time."

Waiting out detention was hard enough, but waiting out at home was even worse. It was almost like dying as we headed away from Manhattan, back into Queens, and then had to act like we totally weren't going to sneak out that night and break into one of New York's most secure buildings in front of Aunt May.

On the other hand, she seemed beside herself with relief.

"Peter seems to be doing better, don't you think?" she said to me over the counter, mixing a bowl of salad for dinner. "I'm glad you talked to him, it seemed to have really helped."

I sat on the other end, chewing a granola bar and not meeting her eyes. I didn't want to explain how my attempt to speak to Peter had not only failed, but completed the opposite effect. We now had proof Tony Stark was alive, and were now about to get into some deep shit. "Aah, ha-ha, yep. I, uh, I did my best. No p-problemo."

I glanced away, unable to meet her eyes. Sunlight streamed through the windows — it had been bright the whole day, so I predicted a clear night tonight.

"Well, good," Aunt May continued, looking satisfied. "I know it might sound a little selfish, but I was afraid it would ruin Christmas for Peter. He loves it so much, but then there's the timing…" she sighed, shook her head to herself. "Well, at least we have nothing else to worry about. Finals are done, vacation's started. I think we all deserve a little break."

It was around 9PM did Aunt May finally go to bed, and we waited an extra thirty minutes just to be safe. I tried to convince Peter not to leave with his spider suit on — because I had nothing special to wear, and I didn't want Amelia Fletcher to be associated with Spider-Man, friendly-neighborhood guy and sometimes-menace to society. But Peter had to hide his identity, and getting caught as Spider-Man meant he could easily escape. We compromised with Peter wearing his suit beneath his regular jacket and clothes, and keeping the mask off till he needed it.
When we slipped out of Peter's window, I was dressed just in my usual—jeans and green jacket. It was getting harder and harder to convince Aunt May I could keep it as it continued getting more and more worn (and riddled with bullet holes).

"I can't believe you aren't cold in that," Peter said later, when we were standing at the foot of Stark Tower. He was positively shivering next to me. Although the sky was as clear as I predicted, there was a sharp wind cutting through. Hopefully it wouldn't become a problem.

"I'm fine," I replied offhand, studying Stark Tower. Only a few floors were lit up—people still working, offices being cleaned. Otherwise, the building seemed inactive. The fountains were off, none of the projections were on display anymore. I could see the entrance lobby was dark from where I was standing, just a lone security guard manning the front desk.

We milled with the nighttime crowd on the street outside—there were plenty of tourists taking pictures, awed by Stark Tower, even in the midst of renovation. Camera flashes, street lights, car lights blinked and flickered all around us. Despite the darkness, the world still seemed alive and energetic.

"His main office is in the penthouse," Peter pointed upwards, towards the top of the tower, covering in white tarp. "All the way at the top. You can take my keycard, it should still have access to it."

I looked down, staring at Peter handed me his lanyard. I took it, baffled. "Wait, how do you have personal access to Tony Stark's office?"

Peter flushed, looked down. "It's 'cuz—well, I'm Spider-Man. You know?"

"Riiiight," I drew out the word, giving Peter one last look before tucking his card in my pocket. I had my own, which I kept in my other hand. "Well, my card should be able to get me through the front doors. Shouldn't be too hard once I get to the elevators. You got your headphones?"

"Yep," Peter said, pulling out his phone. I did the same; putting only one earphone in, I plugged it into the phone and started called Peter's.

As soon as he picked up, I tested the microphone, covering my mouth. "Check, check. You think you'll be able to hear me while you're on the outside?"

The microphone picked up noise from the wind, even down here. Peter also had one headphone in as he said, "Yeah, I just hope you'll be able to hear me."

It was the best we could do to remain in contact with one another; We didn't have any fancy spy earpieces they had in the movies. The plan was to split up, enter the office from different points. Maybe it seemed superfluous; my way in just seemed so simple, there was no need for Peter to swing up the side of Stark Tower. But I had no idea what security was on the inside, and if I got stuck, at least I wouldn't have to worry about Peter getting into the same trouble. There was nothing for him to worry about on the outside (aside from the cold).

"Ready?" I asked, fixing my earphone.

"Yeah. Codenames only?"

"Codenames only."

"Awesome, ready," Peter grinned at me. "First one to the top is a rotten egg!"

I just stood there glumly as he turned on his heel and raced off, disappearing into the crowd. I waited
until he was gone before I muttered, "I hate you so much."

"I heard that."

With nothing better to do, I heaved a sigh and headed inside. My keycard worked on the front door, something I almost didn't expect this late — I'd never really came back to Stark Tower after the interview so I had no idea if it would still work at all. And yet I managed to pass by the security officer on duty without so much as a second glance. I tried to make myself look tall and important, like I knew exactly what I was doing and where I was supposed to be — which, technically, I did. It helped that I took off my jacket to reveal the blazer underneath. Coupled with the lanyard and not-shitty backpack, I actually looked halfway decent and professional. Fake it till you make it.

"All right, I'm in," I whispered into the microphone on the cord, glancing over my shoulder to make sure the security officer didn't overhear.

"Awesome. The Goose is on the loose."

I rolled my eyes. "Just keep me updated on what floor you're on."

"Roger. Currently passing floor 22."

Floor 22 already? Dammit, I was gonna lose. I made it to the first elevator unhindered. Stepping inside, though I ran into my first problem.

It did not go all the way to the penthouse.

Frowning, I pressed the highest floor number available — 82 — before rethinking my plan. Did I not notice it before? It seemed so inconvenient. How did Tony Stark get from ground floor to the penthouse? Did he have a private elevator?

Oh, who was I kidding? Tony Stark didn't take the goddamn elevator. He'd fly in on his frickin' Iron Man suit. Idiot.

In my ear, I could hear the wind and Peter's soft panting as he climbed up the side of the building. "Hey, Mav, how did you get up to Stark's penthouse before?"

"Oh, I swung in."

"Of course you did."

Maybe it was a security measure. Tony Stark probably didn't want anyone accessing the higher levels so easily. How hard would it be to fool a keycard access? Maybe the upper floors were devoted to the Avengers, and he'd need higher security for that. Didn't want some rando walking in on the Hulk taking a bath or something.

The elevator dinged softly as I stepped out onto the 76th floor, looking around. There had to be another way up, a different elevator. Or maybe an emergency stairwell. Hopefully that wouldn't trigger any alarms…

I wandered around for a bit, checking the dark hallways. Everything was a soft blue hue, small wall lights illuminating the way. The windows were just a void of darkness. Computers, desks and chairs were like black, crouching gremlins, completely still until I looked away. While I was technically not trespassing, I did my best to make my footsteps utterly silent — which made the experience all the more eerie. Occasionally I spotted my reflection passing in the glass. I was entirely alone up here.
I kept looking for five minutes. The floorplan was smaller further up the tower; there weren't exactly a lot of places to look. There were no other elevators. I returned to the one I left from, checked the other two nearby. They all stopped at 82.

"Floor 76," Peter reported. The noise level on the headphones was getting louder, starting to overtake his voice.

"I'm on 82. Can't seem to get up to the penthouse from the normal elevators," I replied. I stopped, scowled down the room. It seemed I was on a floor housing a law firm. I had to be right beneath the Avengers set-up. There had to be another way around. There was no time to be looking for private elevators — I was almost there.

"There has to be some stairs, if you can't find the right elevator," Peter said. "I'd pull up building schematics on my phone but, uh...I kinda can't feel my fingers right now. Also, I'm high-up. Really, really high."

"Alright then," I muttered, mostly to myself. "Stairwell it is, then."

"Hey, what're you doing up here?" someone called out behind me. I tensed, surprised. I hadn't heard anyone approach, so when I heard the female voice, I nearly panicked. Quickly yanking out my earphone, I whirled around. Shit shit shit not supposed to be here —

"I asked you a question," the woman said, from down the hallway. She walked closer, and I realized she wasn't a security guard; late-twenties or early-thirties, she was dressed in casual jeans and a leather jacket. Sharp black boots. Bobbed red hair bounced with each step, and sharp green eyes pinned me to the spot. She came to a stop in front of me, crossing her arms. "I expect an answer. Who are you?"

For a moment, I was speechless with fear, my hand clenched tightly around my headphones. Then my mouth opened and said the first thing that popped into my head. "...I-I could ask you the s-same question. I'm an intern here at —" I glanced at the logo on the wall next to the elevators, struggling on the words for a moment "— Sterling & Bosch. My boss, Sara Ellis —" A name stolen from a nearby office plaque "— wanted me to fetch a file for her. She has a big insurance case to settle tomorrow, n-not that you'd know that, because I'm pretty sure I've never seen you here before."

I couldn't believe what I had just spit out until after I was finished. Spinning up that little tale on the spot had my heart pounding faster than the fight on the dock. I had no proof beyond my card that I worked in this building. A cursory search of employee records would reveal that I did not, in fact, work as an intern at an insurance agency. And I had no fucking clue if this woman did, I was just playing a hunch, but the look she gave me at that last bit could freeze hell over.

"Well, you got me there," After a long moment, the woman relaxed a little, her arms dropping. She smirked a little, but her eyes still had that vaguely threatening glimmer. "Unfortunately, my business is none of yours, so I suggest you get your files and leave before security locks down the building for night."

I nodded stiffly and pivoted on my heel, going straight into Sara Ellis' office, thanking the universe that her office door had been left open. The jig would be up if I couldn't get in. I was not about to question the redhead's non-excuse, either — I was pushing my luck as it was. Didn't want to make her mad on top of it all.

The redheaded woman remained outside, watching me from the hallway as I went around the
unfamiliar desk, perusing as if I knew what I was looking for. Paused at the file on the desktop before having a second thought and sliding over to the filing cabinet and opening a drawer. Had to look relaxed, self-important, like I was who I said I was, and not like I was being stared down by a woman who, while shorter than me, exuded a presence that made me want to run in the other direction.

"So, you're here alone?" The woman leaned against the doorway as I flicked through some tabs, reading names of things I didn't understand.

I looked up in time to see Spider-Man crawling up the opposite windows directly behind the woman. He spotted me inside and waved.

"Yep," I said, face completely straight, eyes sliding back to the woman in front of me. My phone practically burned in my pocket. "Just me. Ms. Ellis only has one intern, after all."

Perhaps sensing my distraction, the redheaded woman glanced over her shoulder — Peter had just slipped out of sight the second before, his foot disappearing behind the top of the window.

When the woman returned to me, I forced a tight-lipped smile on my face.

"Hm," She tilted her head, pursing her lips. That's it. It was her eyes. They reminded me of someone.

I just couldn't put my finger on it...

Losing my nerve, I yanked out a file at random and slammed the drawer shut and headed towards the woman, out the door. "Ah, got it! See, that was quick. Now I can go —"

"Wait a second," The woman grabbed me right above the elbow, just as I passed her through the threshold. Her grip was solid, tight, and stopped me in my tracks. "I'm not done —"

The sudden touch set off every synapse in my brain, going up like fireworks. I reacted on instinct.

I jerked up my arm, twisting around and jumping back. It loosened her grip and she let go; if it hadn't been for her speed, the woman would've been elbowed in the face.

The action was quick, over in a second. I now stood in the hallway, facing the woman, fists clenched and shoulders hunched, like we were about to fight.

The woman remained composed, at ease. The look in her eyes said something different, though. I had surprised her. Well, I'd surprised myself, too. I had to fight how hard I was breathing, trying to recollect myself. Holy shit, what the hell was wrong with me?

Her hand was still raised, open, and the woman brought it down with a small huff. A tiny smile pulled at her lips, as if something amused her. "Sorry, I get a little...grabby sometimes. I was just wanted to make sure you didn't forget anything."

I stared at her for a moment, my mouth dry. Forcing myself to relax, I muttered, "Yeah, I've got everything."

The file was still in my hand — crunched thanks to my grip. "If you're done with the interview, I'd like to go now."

The woman's eyes narrowed, appraising me one last time before she nodded. "You're all set. And stay out of trouble. I've got my eye on you, Mia."

A little sour about all this, I started heading towards the elevators without another word. Back ramrod
straight, unwanted file clutched in my hand, I had no idea what just happened. Like, jeez, what was that woman's problem —

Then I spun around, alarmed. "Hey, wait —"

But the hallway behind me was empty. The redheaded woman had vanished.

I had never told her my name.

"...The hell?" I did a double-take. I looked around me, but I had no idea where she went. Without a sound, the woman left, as if she'd never been there at all.

Too freaked out to figure out what the hell was going on, I turned on my heel and made a beeline for the stairwell. It was around the corner from the elevators and I was going so fast, trying to get out of there, that I nearly tumbled out to the other side.

As the door shut behind me, I quickly stuffed the earphone back in. "Hey, you still here, Maverick?"

"Yeah, what the hell happened down there, Goose? Who was that lady?"

"Sorry, had to run interference. She shouldn't be a problem," I said, looking up. There were at least ten more floors above me. Each door had a security camera above. Well, too late to avoid those.

"Probably."

"I'm almost there. Just have to get through this window…"

Deciding to choose speed over stealth, I decided to power up those last couple flights, leaping up the steps two at a time. My footsteps rebounding off the walls like gunshots. The stairwell was grey and empty, industrial wall lights leaving too many shadows everywhere. Again, absolutely no one here.

Finally, I made it. "Floor 95," I whispered into my microphone as I slipped Peter's card through the reader. The little light blinked from red to green, followed by a click, and I slowly pulled opened the door.

I stepped into what appeared to be some sort of living room. There was a bar to the right, and directly in front of me was the massive balcony for Iron Man's suit, and whatever flying bullshit comes through here. I looked around, wondering where Stark's office would be. After the run-in with that weird lady, I was officially done for the night. I just wanted to find his location and get the hell out of here.

I took a left, down a hallway, and jogged around a bit. None of the doors here were labeled. This was clearly a residence rather than an office space. The furniture was sleek but casual — lived in. Modern black tiles were covered in footprints. Some shoes and clothes were lying around. Empty glasses, dirty plates left on tables. But just like the rest of the building, the place was dark, empty. No one around.

I just started peeking into doorways until I found Tony Stark's office, all the way on the other side of the floor. The door was locked, but I had a neat little trick up my sleeve to unlock it.

WHAM.

The door swung open, cracking on its hinges when I slammed my foot just above the handle. Falling back on both feet, I stepped inside, glancing around. Aside from some dim floor lights, the room was dark.
Against the window, outlined by the white tarp, was Spider-Man. Upon seeing me enter, he perked up, knocked against the window. "Hey, Kool-Aid Man, think you can let me in?"

Coming over to inspect the glass, I pushed a panel open — the opening was only a few inches wide, but with a little elbow grease, I forced it open just enough for Peter to squeeze inside.

"Ooh wow, that was brisk," Peter shuddered, collapsing against the desk, hugging himself and shaking from head to foot. "Next time, I take the elevator and you go outside, all right?"

Beneath Peter's elbow, the black surface of the desk lit up. He jumped away with a tiny yelp, and I drew closer, watching as Tony Stark's login screen appeared on what was actually a giant browser set into his desk.

Our next problem: logging into Tony Stark's account.

"I don't suppose you have the password," I said, half-sighing because I already knew the answer. I dropped the Ellis file on the desk; I didn't even know why I held onto it for so long. I wasn't particularly concerned with returning it to its owner, and forgot about it soon enough.

"Nope," Peter replied, pulling off his mask. He had his backpack over one shoulder, and pulled out his jacket, stuffed it back on. His cheeks and ears were bright pink, and he rubbed his palms together to warm them up. "I don't suppose you can hack that, either."

"No." I bit my lip, stood up again. "Maybe he has it written down somewhere."

Peter threw me a disbelieving look. "Oh, come on. Tony Stark has built some of the most advanced security software known to man. You really think he'd be dumb enough to leave his password just lying around for anyone to find it? Would he really be so...conventional?"

I glanced at the door I just broke down a minute ago. Nothing about this night was conventional. "I don't know. Maybe he just doesn't expect anyone to try it. Let's not forget he announced his private address on public television."

Peter frowned at me for a long moment. "...Touché."

So, we started looking around. Around the monitor, under the desk, beneath the keyboard. There was a closet and a coat rack, which Peter went through. We moved quietly — the only noise in the office was the hum of the large computer desk and the air vents above. I kept an eye on the doorway. I was starting to regret making such an entrance; if anyone walked by it would be pretty obvious something wasn't right. I just hoped we'd be gone by then.

My hand caught on something beneath the seat just as I sat down — and I pulled out an orange sticky-note.

On it, in hastily scrawled pencil, was the phrase:

\textit{KILLIANSUX}

"Found it!" I crowed, waving the note in the air, before rolling over to the desk again. I was already typing it in as Peter hopped back over, sliding across the desk to come to my side.

"What now?" Peter asked as the desktop opened. Using my finger, I dragged the cursor across the touchscreen, going into the file search engine. "Is it... is it really that simple?"

I just threw him a shrug, before typing in a command. 'Find Phone'
As a window popped up, loading, Peter continued, "You know, it's weird. I figured JARVIS might be up on this or something. He usually talks when you're on."

"Maybe he's offline?"

Peter looked unsure, studied the near distance, lost in thought. "Yeah, maybe…"

Being on Stark's computer did exactly as I expected it to. When I found the function for pinging his phone, I didn't need another password to use it. We watched, eyes rapt and utterly silent, as the computer began to hum again, triangulating Tony Stark's location. The screen filled up with a giant map of the world, continually getting smaller and smaller as it triangulated his location until, finally, narrowing in on a small town in southeastern United States.

"Oh my god, that's it! He's alive!" Peter jumped back, throwing his arms up in the air in a whoop. "Mr. Stark's alive! I knew it! He's alive and he's in — where the hell is Rose Hill, Tennessee?"

"No idea," I said, as baffled as he was. Rose Hill looked like a nothing town. It lied on the edge of a county, nowhere near any large or well-known city. Certainly not a place a man like Tony Stark would go to. "Maybe he chose it because no one would find him there?"

"Can we call him?" Peter asked, but our attempts were fruitless. It wasn't that the computer couldn't do it, it could — but we only got an error message. "I don't get it. How can we ping him but not be able to find him?"

"Pinging works even with the phone off," I replied. "Well, for him. At least we know where he is, now."

"Yeah," Peter huffed, stuffing his hands in his pockets. He still seemed doubtful. "…I'm hungry, I'm going to go find something to eat."

"I — what? Peter, wait —" I started, but Peter was already heading out, clearly distracted with something he was working out in his head. I let him go, shaking my head to myself, before going back to the computer.

Pulling up an internet browser, I looked up local Rose Hill news. Somehow, I got the feeling that this place couldn't be just a random choice for Tony Stark. In desperate times like this, with stakes so high, every choice he made had to be for a reason.

Unfortunately, there was nothing recent. Like I thought before, Rose Hill was just some podunk little redneck town. Its biggest selling point was an okay high school football team and a few bars. The biggest news was closing factories and the lack of available jobs.

That is, until I kept scrolling.

**ARMY VET SUICIDE BOMBER DEVASTATES TENNESSEE TOWN**

Holy shit, what? My eyes blinked, thinking my brain had read that wrong. But no, I scanned the line again, word for word. This was it.

I clicked on the link, and read through the article so fast I had to go through it again because I absorbed nothing. Apparently, several years ago, a former soldier had rigged a bomb so destructive that it killed five people, including himself, leaving absolutely no trace evidence behind. No clue as to what kind of bomb he used, the ingredients, the method.

All he left behind was a wife and two kids, who still lived in Rose Hill today.
I stared at the article, at the pictures of a small-town square turned to ash. The five shadows of the victims, all that remained of their lives.

My mind was going a million miles an hour. This couldn't be a coincidence. There was just no way. Were me and Tony Stark investigating the same people? Did he know it was Extremis? He had to have some idea, otherwise why would the story interest him?

Getting up from my seat, I left the computer behind to find Peter and tell him what else I had discovered.

He was behind the bar, shifting through bottles of alcohol and jars of olives. As I approached, he called, "Mr. Stark has a lot of wine and vodka. I'm just looking for something so I don't have to drink water out of a martini glass."

"I can't believe you're right," I said, almost to myself. I leaned against the counter. It was strange, being here in the dark, chatting like it was no big deal. The wine rack was backlit, the only source of light for us. "Tony Stark is alive and he's in Tennessee. I think he's investigating a suicide bomber. It might be Extremis."

"So, he knows, too?" Peter looked up, surprised.

"If he doesn't, he will soon, I imagine." I replied. The guy just had his house blown up in an assassination attempt. How long would it take for Tony Stark to figure out who it was?

Peter hopped up onto the counter, sitting down cross-legged. He had taken a box of crackers from a cabinet. He spoke as I climbed up next to him. "So, I think our next step is to head out to Tennessee. No one else knows Tony Stark is alive and we can't tell anyone. We don't know who exactly is after him. The Mandarin might find out. But there's no way Aunt May is letting us go to Tennessee, even on vacation…"

"Peter, we're still grounded. She's not going to even let us out of the city," I pointed out, pausing when he picked up a bottle of vodka and held it out to me. "...Um, what?"

"You said you were a super soldier, right? You probably can't get drunk."

My eyes narrowed. I took the bottle slowly. "…Not that I've tried."

"I mean," Peter shrugged, looking around furtively for a second. "You can try now, right? I don't have spidey-powers, not super-sober powers," Peter laughed at his own joke, laughed harder when I kicked him. "C'mon, just tell me how it tastes."

I heaved a sigh, and for a long moment I was conflicted. Should I really be drinking right now? Was my metabolism as fast as Captain America's? I had no reason to believe otherwise. I studied the label: Grey Goose. I assumed that was fancy. And it wasn't like we were driving, either… I unscrewed the cap, and with Peter watching me with an increasingly giddy grin, took a swig of vodka.

The smell hit me first — not unlike nail polish remover, my eyes burned a little and I almost recoiled. The liquid didn't taste much better. It was bitter, but the burning aftertaste was what had me choking. "Ugh, god, it's like straight ethanol! How can Stark drink this stuff? Eckh."

I continued to gag a little while Peter keeled over laughing. I glared at him, then took another swig. It
wasn't much better than the first try, but at least I knew what to expect this time. I shuddered again at the taste, then took another sip. The bottle was heavy and awkward in my hand, but I kept trying to figure out what it tasted like. I wanted to understand what made this good or expensive.

Then I paused, had a sudden existential moment. Fifteen-years-old, breaking into someone else's home and drinking their fancy-ass vodka. I was turning into the regular teenage delinquent. This was clearly the end-times. "I can't believe you've driven me to drinking, Mav." I said, shaking my head and laughing a little. "We're never telling Aunt May about this."

"Are you kidding? She'd kill us just for sneaking out of the apartment," Peter snorted, stuffing his face with crackers. "May would have a straight-up conniption if she found out either of us drank. I still don't know how we'll get to Tennessee. We can't fly. FBI still won't let you get on a plane."

"We'll think of something," I said, taking another swig. I had no idea what it was going to be, but I was hoping maybe the vodka would help because honestly its taste wasn't doing anything for me. But this was going to be a hell of a task — I had no idea how long it would take to get to Rose Hill, or how long we'd be there. How were we going to explain that absence to Aunt May, who was home all the time?

"Remember when the dumbest thing we ever did was go sneaking out to get some ice cream?" Peter mused with a half-dreamy, half-ironic smile. "While it was still daylight, of course."

"And I was unknowingly dying of tuberculosis," I added sardonically, then raised my bottle in a toast. "Those were the days!"

Suddenly, Peter's arm snapped up towards my face — catching an arrow in his fist. It vibrated in his grip, blunt end inches from my head. Startled, I yelped, falling backwards off the counter.

Peter stared at the arrow, looking more surprised that he caught it than anything else. "What the hell —?"

Then the arrow exploded.
Finally finished this little project haha.
Peter hit the floor next to me, skull cracking against the tile. Noxious gray-green smoke rose up from the now-fallen arrowhead.

I had my back pressed against the bar — the only cover between us and whatever hostile had just fired on us from across the room. I took Peter by the shoulders and dragged him to a sitting position. As I checked him for any injuries, a voice called out from beyond the bar.

"You know, most people don't take kindly to burglars drinking their alcohol," A man called, sounding rather annoyed. "What I'm trying to figure out though, is why, of all places, you chose here?"

"Pretty sure they're underage, too," a female voice added. My blood went cold. It was the redhead who'd caught me earlier.

I tried peering around the edge of the bar, already searching for an exit — but an arrow shot past my nose a split second later. It smashed into the glass cabinets behind the bar and I snapped my head back. Dammit. I didn't get the chance to see anything. My mind was racing. Whoever was using a goddamn *bow and arrow* in the 21st century happened to be very good at it.

I had to admit, I didn't expect this kind of trouble breaking into Stark's home. It must be that classic teen sense of invincibility because I had no idea I'd run into these kinds of consequences. At the very least, our current attackers didn't seem to realize our true purpose here. Yet.

"What?" The man blurted, disbelieving. Then, at us, "Hey, how old are you?"

"Fifteen?" Peter shouted back before I could clap a hand over his mouth. I threw him a look and he just shrugged.

"*Fifteen* —?" The man repeated, spluttering. "Nat, are you hearing this? You're telling me two delinquent fetuses broke into Avengers Tower just to drink some vodka?"

"To be fair, Clint," the woman said diplomatically. "We've done worse things at their age."

"Yeah, but they weren't trained since birth to shoot things and kill people! I sure as hell wasn't spending my time breaking into high-security locations just to binge-drink some old dude's wine cellar."

"*You* wouldn't," the woman snorted. "But you haven't tried Stark's vodka collection, either. Coming from an expert, it's like heaven. "

"*Not. Helping.* Nat."

"Just saying…"

"Who're these guys?" I whispered to Peter while the other two debated the circumstances of us being
"I think they're Avengers!" He looked beside himself with glee. "Hawkeye and Black Widow want to kill us!"

"We don't want to kill you!" Hawkeye called almost immediately. "Let's not make this a big deal, okay? You just surprised us, that's all."

"I clocked the girl coming in twenty minutes ago." Black Widow said. "Technically, I let her up here."

"What? Why?"

"I wanted to see what happened."

"Oh my god."

As they continued to argue, I realized I still had the bottle of vodka in my hand and took another sip while Peter checked the time. Then he showed me his watch, tapping the face. It was half past midnight. We had to be getting home, pronto.

There was no way we could afford getting caught like this.

"Can't you just let us go?" I called back, crossing my fingers and praying that maybe we'd get lucky. "We're not here to cause any problems."

"Forgive us if we don't take your word of it," Black Widow replied. "People in the habit of breaking and entering don't automatically inspire trust. And before you get any funny ideas, I don't recommend fighting your way out. If you get hurt, we're not gonna feel too bad."

"Well, I might a little," Hawkeye murmured.

"This can go the easy way or the hard way," Black Widow added. "Your choice."

Our backs against the bar, Peter and I exchanged looks. Nodding in unison, we said, "Hard way."

Then Peter grabbed a wine bottle, and I picked up a metal platter that had fallen when the cabinets broke. Leaning over the side, I held out the platter; the metal was finely polished, and I could make out a reflection — right before an arrow knocked it out of my hand.

"Hawkeye is on our six, behind the column," I whispered to Peter as he pulled on his mask, testing his light-filtered goggles. "Black Widow behind the couch, 4 o’clock. The stairs and elevators are behind them, and I can't see any other way out."

"I got her," Peter replied, peeling the foil off the top of the wine bottle. "You take Hawkeye, then head towards the balcony," he pointed to his left, over his shoulder to the wall of windows. I couldn't quite make out the entrance from our low position, but I could make out the cloudy sky and free-floating metal platform. "I'll cover you."

I frowned a little, not quite sure what he was getting at, but nodded nonetheless. The balcony was more or less between us and the two Avengers. It'd be far easier to get to than the more conventional exits I had been aiming for. "Okay, on the count of three? One."

"Two." Peter whispered.

"Three!" We said together, then turned at once.
Peter rolled on his side, towards the opposite side of the bar I was on, and popped the bottle.

The cork went off like a rocket, a loud pop that made even me jump. It bounced off the ceiling and before it was even out of sight Peter had already leapt over the counter.

"What the hell is that?" Hawkeye cried at the sight of Spider-Man. I heard a grunt as he took a blow — it sounded like he had already intercepted someone.

"I think it's one of Stark's pet projects," Widow said through gritted teeth.

"He's got a sidekick now?" Hawkeye sounded amused.

"I'm not a sidekick!" Peter shouted, annoyed. I saw his shadow leaping across the ceiling. "I'm Spider-Man!"

"Spider-Man? How can you be Spider-Man if you're fifteen?" Widow asked.

"Told you, sidekick." Hawkeye added.

"Shut up!" Peter called back, starting to sound a little helpless.

I picked up the same metal platter from before, now a little dented. I glanced over my shoulder, eyeing the column I could just make out past the top of the bar. I gauged the distance, the angle — then threw the platter as hard as I could against the far wall.

Clang!

"Ow, fuck!" Hawkeye cursed when the plate hit its target. "My eye —!"

With him properly distracted, I ducked out from behind the bar and scrambled for the balcony.

Only problem — Spider-Man and Black Widow were in my way.

"You okay, Clint?" Black Widow called as Hawkeye continued cussing up a storm. She and Peter were fighting directly in the center of the room. Well, not fighting, exactly. Peter was on the ceiling and Black Widow was trying to get a shot at him. On her wrists, she wielded two matching gauntlets, glowing faintly blue — she hadn't been wearing them the last time. I managed to duck right past her. He bounced back and forth between the support beams, yelping when one of Black Widows' little bolts caught him in the shoulder.

"Oh, I'm fine!" He called back, still spewing profanities. I glanced over and saw him crouched behind the column, hand covering his eye as he grimaced in pain. Like Widow, he was in plainclothes, aside from his weapons, which included a black bow and a quiver full of arrows. "She just frisbee'd a plate into my face, but besides that I'm fine! It's not like I needed to see or anything!"

"Oh, quit whining!" Black Widow replied after Spider-Man managed to land a glancing kick to her head. "And start — Hey!"

Caught by surprise, Black Widow spun around and managed to land a foot squarely into the center of my back.

I gasped, tumbling forward with more momentum than I wanted. I crashed at the foot of the balcony doors — which was quite fortunate, actually, as an arrow also meant for my back, went flying over my head.

I had no intention to fight either Hawkeye or Black Widow — it wasn't why Peter and I were here,
and we didn't really have a lot of time to be screwing around. Also, I personally didn't like our chances against far more experienced heroes, so escape was the better option by far.

The arrowhead hit the glass doors — it wasn't a normal arrow with a pointed end, but had three prongs that extended outwards, flattening against the surface and sparking ominously. A stun arrow?

Without pausing to think about it, I jumped back up, grabbed the arrow, and snapped off the head. Then I threw the arrow at Hawkeye, who had just stepped out from his cover. He let out a yelp and recoiled when the thrown arrow embedded itself into the wood right beside his face.

As soon as he flinched, I shot out the doors as they opened automatically behind.

Sharp, bitter wind pierced straight through my clothes. It blustered through the apartment, snowflakes stinging, sending loose objects awry. Papers went up, curtains were buffeted, and everyone else paused to block their eyes or turn around. I twisted on my heel and ran outside.

The world was entirely black around me. If it weren't for the softly blinking lights of the landing pad marking solid ground, it would've felt like I was running across thin air. The loud snap of the flapping tarp in the growing storm filled the air, making hard to hear anything at all. I wouldn't have known I was being followed until I finally stopped and looked behind me.

Another arrow flew over my shoulder and I ducked, nearly slipping on the icy metal. Dropping down to both hands, I glanced over my shoulder — Black Widow tried to give chase, but as she stepped over the threshold, she let out a yelp and was suddenly yanked back into the apartment.

Over her leapt Spider-Man, fighting against the wind. He caught another arrow as it came flying by and slung it back just as quick — the arrow went off in with a loud bang and a flash of smoke. Two equal cries of shock went up as Peter landed and caught up with me.

"What do we do now?" I demanded, eyes watering against the wind.

"I-I don't know!" Peter said, his hands wringing helplessly. "I didn't think we'd get this far!"

"What do you mean? Peter, we're trapped!"

"I know!"

"Then why did you tell me to go here?!

"Because I panicked! I thought it sounded cool!"

"Oh my god," I groaned. I was caught between wanting to slap my forehead or strangle Peter — serves me right for just doing what Peter said without coming up with a better escape route.

An arrow landed at our feet. We jumped back just in time before a thick, bubbling substance blossomed across the balcony, thick and tar-like. Peter grabbed my arm and pulled me further back, closer to the end of the balcony. I glanced behind me. We were running out of room.

"Well?" I demanded as the two Avengers appeared in the doorway. Hawkeye had his bow drawn. Widow raised her arm to shield her face against the wind.

"Well what?" Peter said back.

"This is your stupid plan! How do we get out of here?"

"Um —" Peter shrugged helplessly, but before he could continue, he was interrupted by Widow.
"Come on, you two!" She called out. "It's the end of the line!"

"We promise," Hawkeye called, leveling an arrow at my chest. "Nothing bad will happen to you."

Peter and I exchanged looks. Even if what they were saying was true, we couldn't afford to get caught. Knowing where Tony Stark was, we had to get there as soon as possible.

"We can't!" I shouted. "Tony Stark's still alive!"

"What?" Black Widow scowled.

"What did she say?" Hawkeye added, face grimacing against the cold. "I didn't catch that!"

"That isn't funny, kid!" Widow ignored him, snarling at me. "We're not here to play games! I'm giving you one last chance to give up now!"

"Oh shit," Peter turned to me, shouting over the storm. "Please don't hate me!"

"What?" I threw him a bewildered look, but didn't have the chance to inquire further before he pushed me off the ledge.

I didn't even have it in me to scream — If I did, it'd be Peter's name in a very angry manner. I toppled into thin air, breath locked in my throat.

It was like the bridge, only worse. There was no short drop into water to break my fall — just endless sky, black glass and sparkling streets below. It felt like I went upside down on a roller coaster and was stuck there, my insides floating, suspended, in empty space.

As I plummeted, a strange thought filled my head. A human body fell at a rate of nine point eight meters per second per second. I'd hit tarmac — or a car, or the curb, or a canopy — at terminal velocity. At least I had one little solace. The impact would kill me instantly.

...Probably. I didn't know the survival rate of a super soldier falling from thousands of feet in the air. Luckily for me, I wouldn't have to worry about that. The same idiot cousin who threw me off a building also had to be same one to save me.

I heard the incoming whoop right before Peter swung past, just underneath me. He caught me with both arms, barrel-rolled in midair to absorb my fall without injury, before one thwip later and we were dropping away from Stark Tower, down and up again like a pendulum.

"I hate you!" I pounded my fist against his chest, fighting hard not to throw up. "So! Much!"

"Sorry!" Peter called back, wincing. The roller coaster analogy had become a little too appropriate now. My head was swimming thanks to the rather unnecessary loops and drops Peter was taking. "It was the quickest way out of there!"

He had a point — thanks to that little stunt, we had successfully escaped an otherwise impossible situation. Even now, as I looked up at Stark Tower, I could just barely make out two lone figures standing, bereft, on the landing pad, watching us disappear along the grid of avenues and parkways.

We were so dead.

So, I resigned from my desire to kill him and instead clung for dear life and tried not to think about how dizzy I felt, swinging around town like a deranged Tarzan on PCP. How could Peter do this on the daily? I could barely even see.
We finally came to a stop on the roof of the MetLife building. Peter was positively shaking now, wiping the film of snowflakes that had gathered across his homemade suit. "Jeez, I should've worn some thermal underwear. Are you still not cold?"

"You mean after you threw me off a building? I couldn't be better!" I threw my arms up, still a little salty about it. Then my hands dropped back to my sides, and I turned to study Stark Tower, visible behind the taller skyscrapers around us. "You think they'll come after us?"

"I dunno," Peter admitted, hugging his shoulders and glancing around the roof. It was completely empty up here, aside from an array of satellite antennas, and what used to be a helipad decades ago. There were stairs leading down to the inside of the building. "I don't think they knew who we were. At least they didn't see my face…"

The situation was uncertain. I turned around and started heading towards the south end of the roof, looking over the edge. Beneath us, lit up in warm, welcoming lights, was Grand Central Terminal. As the adrenaline wore off, my stutter returned. "We sh-should get home, then. Pack up, figure out a way to Tennessee, then leave as soon as possible, b-before they can catch up with us."

Peter came up beside me, pulling off his mask. His expression was doubtful, maybe even afraid. "Are you sure? We don't even know what we're going to tell Aunt May."

"W-well, we have to do something, right? That's the whole reason we broke into Stark Tower to begin with."

"Yeah…" Peter bit his lip, glanced over his shoulder at the building still under reconstruction. "You heard what they called it, right? Avengers Tower."

"I g-guess they're here to stay," I remarked, somewhat less enthused. While I hadn't doubted the strength of the Avengers, hearing that made it sound a lot more permanent. The Avengers weren't just a fad of 2012. They were here, and they were going to make history.

"Not if Tony Stark dies first," Peter pointed out, then fixed me with a hard look. "You're right, we should leave soon. If we can't fly there, then we can take a bus, or a train. Tennessee is 900 miles from New York City — it'll take us at least thirteen hours to get there."

"All right, Rain Man, that gives us two days at best to get there and find Tony Stark. We can help him, m-maybe contact the other Avengers? I-I mean, if they even want to help us at this point."

Peter cast me a barely suppressed smirk. "How mad do you think they are right now?"

"After letting two delinquent fetuses e-escape right through their fingers?" I replied, cocking an eyebrow. "Pretty pissed, I'd say."

"Awesome! I can't wait to tell Mr. Stark," Peter grinned, then stepped up to the ledge of the building. "Come on, I'll get us home in no time."

"Goddammit, more swinging?" I had to restrain a groan. "Why?"

I woke up early the next morning to prepare.
When we got home last night, the apartment was still dark, and I ended up passing out on Peter's top bunk, too exhausted to go to my own room. I was still a little sore getting up, really starting to feel that boot print Widow left on my back. Jumping down from the bunk, I nudged Peter awake. Only his blankets hid the fact he was still wearing his Spidey costume.

"Hey, Mav, get up," I whispered, sitting down in his desk chair and continuing to prod Peter with my foot. "I can smell pancakes. Aunt May's already awake. Peter, your suit!"

"Mmmf, what?" Peter mumbled from beneath his pillow. Lifting his head, he squinted at me in the morning light, raising his hand to shield his eyes. When he realized he still had his web-shooters on, Peter jolted upright. "Oh shit —"

He was already fiddling with the wrist straps when I heard footsteps coming down the hall. Aunt May had just knocked and peered in when Peter managed to yank them off and throw them over the far side of the bed, against the wall. He pulled up his blankets to cover the spider logo just as she said, "Peter, breakfast is read — oh, hi, Mia. I didn't think you'd be in here. What're you two up so early for?"

Peter and I exchanged looks, then smiled back at Aunt May in identical shrugs. "Nothing."

Aunt May paused, her eyes flicking between us, brow furrowing slightly. "Uh-huh...well, I've got a fresh batch of pancakes for everyone. And just letting you know now, I'm going to be heading out later today, alright? I'll be gone for the next couple days."


"A company retreat!" Aunt May replied, smiling as if this weren't a completely bizarre and well-timed development. "I got the call earlier this morning. Our office was invited to this place called Barton Resorts, off of Montauk. Sort of like a holiday celebration."

"Wow, that sounds..." Peter and I looked at each other again, eyebrows shooting upwards. This couldn't be just a coincidence. "...Great, Aunt May! I hope you have fun."

"Aw, thank you, Peter," Aunt May beamed, clearly beside herself with this news. "I'm looking forward to it, the office hasn't done anything this nice in years. Anyways, I won't be gone for more than a week, and I'll call you every night to make sure everything's okay. You two should have enough food, but in just in case I left some extra cash on the fridge. Try not to spend it all on beer, okay?" She added with a wink, before ducking out the door, humming to herself.

As soon as she was out of earshot, I shot a look at Peter. "Well, that's...awfully convenient."

"You think we should say something to her?" Peter asked, eyebrows knitting together.

We thought about it for a long moment. "...Nah."

In the end, we decided it best not to question it. I wasn't entirely sure what was going on, but I had the distinct feeling someone was throwing us a bone; helping us, for some reason, although I couldn't quite fathom why. Whatever it was, I wasn't going to spoil the opportunity, so I proceeded to act as though everything was fine for the rest of the day.

Aunt May left early in the afternoon, and that's when we finally put our plan to action. We packed fast and light — Peter had already bought bus tickets online with money from his "internship", while I snagged the emergency food cash and stuffed it in my pocket. Aunt May probably hadn't even left the city yet and we were already set to ditch the apartment and head out to Tennessee.
"So," I said in the kitchen, checking the contents of my backpack one last time. "You ready for this?"

Aside from some clothes, I only brought essentials. Water, first aid kit, flashlight, extra batteries, energy bars, a map, and my knife. Going through it all brought an influx of memories of Sokovia and Europe. I packed just like this then. I was practically buzzing with excitement and anticipation.

"You kidding? My first-ever road trip across America?" Peter, opposite me on the table, was gathering his own supplies — largely gadgets and his Spider-Man equipment. I thought about remarking how presumptuous it was, for him to bring stuff expecting to fight, but thought better of it. The chances of us getting into more trouble were pretty high at this point. "I'm totally psyched."

"You got the tickets?"

He raised his hand, holding up two slips of printed paper. "Right here. What about the phone?"

"I got the house number redirected to my cell," I said, patting my pocket over my phone. "Whenever May calls us, she'll think we're still at home. What about the mail?"

"I'll get Ned to collect it. He's got a key to the place. As far as he knows, we're all going on the same vacation. What about Michelle?"

"I told her the same thing, but I'm not sure she entirely believes me," I said, wincing internally. The phone call had felt a little stilted, and I could tell the way MJ spoke that she knew we were still on the Tony Stark thing. "But I don't think she'll tell anyone. We should be fine."

"Good, good," Peter huffed, crossing his arms as he surveyed the table, our gathered supplies, the mostly improvised plan. We were dressed in warm clothes, casual but carefully indistinct. No reason to draw any more attention to ourselves than necessary. "So, we got everything, right? You've done this before."

"Yeah..." I said, tugging at the end of a lock of hair, lost in thought. My hair had grown since I first woke up in Sokovia. It now just barely brushed my shoulders; it was perhaps too soon to say, but I had a feeling my hair grew faster now that I was a Super Soldier.

I knew the Extremis soldiers had increased keratin growth — memories from the Crucible often showed them repeatedly clipping their nails. Extremis had them constantly regenerating even when they weren't injured, which meant daily maintenance. I had a brief moment of gratitude that I didn't have to deal with something as inconvenient as that.

"Goose?" Peter's voice broke me out of my thoughts.

"Huh? What?"

"You didn't say anything. We're all set, right? We didn't miss anything?"

"Oh, right, yeah," I shook my head, recollecting myself. *Get yourself together, not the time to be reminiscing.* I laughed a little to myself. "Sorry, it's just weird. It feels like I'm going on the run again."

Peter cocked his head, confused. "But we're not. We are coming back. Nothing's going to change."

I frowned and leaned against the table, a little skeptical of that idea. "I'm not so sure about that."

"It'll be fine!" Peter urged, offering me a smile, gesturing towards our things. "It's just a, uh, rescue
mission. We go out there, we save Tony Stark, then we come home like everything's normal. It's fine."

"Yeah, maybe," I wanted to believe him, I really did. "If there's even a normal to come back to after we're done."

An hour later, we head out of the apartment, backpacks over our shoulders, tickets in our pockets. As I shut off the lights, I threw one last look across the apartment.

It was so safe, so quiet. For months, it was all I wanted, it was everything I was trying to get back to.

And now, here I was, abandoning it for the life I had thought I wanted to escape from.

Huffing to myself at the irony of it all, I shook my head to myself and closed the door behind us. Rose Hill, Tennessee, here we come.
Chapter Fifty-Three

It was nighttime by the time we hit the Pennsylvania border.

Only blackness flickered outside the windows, barring us inside the muted, rumbling interior of the bus. There were only about half a dozen other people here, leaving me and Peter the only two sharing a row. Soft yellow lights illuminated the columns in small patches — the rest dark.

It was strangely peaceful, and for some reason it made me anxious. I kept checking my phone every two minutes, so sure that I was going to get a message or call from Aunt May, who just discovered we flew the coop.

Instead, I kept getting calls from Dmitri, of all people. For the fourth time since I got on the bus, I denied another call from him.

"Who is that?" Peter asked, peering over my shoulder to glance at my screen. "Your boyfriend?"

"No, wise-ass," I replied, digging my elbow into his side and shoving him away. "The guy I've been tutoring. Kinda more or less ditched him after I ran into Killian."

"Why?"

"Thought it best I should keep my distance," I shrugged, and at Peter's furrowed brow I added, "Killian knows we're friends, okay? I didn't want to give him something — someone — to hurt me with."

"So, this Dmitri doesn't know about you?" Peter asked, and there was a slightly judgmental tone. Like I was in the wrong, somehow.

"Does Aunt May know about you?" I shot back at him. "He knows even less than May. Don't tell me you think that's a bad idea."

"No, no, I get it," Peter held up his hands, showing no offense. "You think I don't want to tell Ned? If anyone knows how hard it is to keep a secret, it's me. I just, I don't know, I don't want you to regret doing this."

"Regret what, going with my best friend on a possibly life-threatening mission to save a possibly-dead Avenger from a bunch of self-immolating domestic terrorists?" I asked, smirking a little. "I wouldn't miss this for the world."

"Oh," Peter blinked, looking mildly surprised. Then he grinned. "Well, in that case, any idea what we're gonna do for the next nine hours?"

"Sleep is always an option," I replied, checking my watch. It was going to be early morning by the time we reached Rose Hill. "I have a feeling we might need it."

Peter shifted uncomfortably in his seat. We'd already been on board for four hours, and I could tell he
was getting antsy. "Yeah, I can try, I guess. Is this what you did the entire time in Europe? Just one long massive road trip stuck in a bus?"

"Well, it was really more like trains," I said, glancing out the window as the lights of a gas station flickered by. Wet snowflakes painted the glass. "The second one was better than the first."

"What happened to the first?"

"It blew up, fell down a mountainside, and started a avalanche," I said, and when I realized how bad that sounded, it was too late to backpedal. I flashed Peter a weak smile. "Trust me, this is going a lot better."

"Uh-huh, yep," Peter hunched his shoulders, his face turning oddly pale. He wrapped his jacket tighter and hugged himself. "What if s-something bad happens?"

"I don't know," I shrugged. "We cross that bridge when we get there, I guess."

"So, improvise? Alright, awesome. I'm great at improvising. Improvising's fun!"

"Relax, Mav," I said, nudging him gently. "It'll be fine. Don't worry about something you can't fix. Especially when nothing isn't even broken yet."

"We're the ones who're gonna be broken when Aunt May finds out," Peter muttered under his breath.

"Now look who's starting to regret," I said in an equally low tone, and that effectively ended the conversation. Least to say, I was pretty sure we were both more worried about this little endeavor than we were willing to admit.

But I didn't want to overthink it. I hadn't yet returned to the mental state I had while escaping the Crucible, and I wasn't about to start now. I was less rational then, easier to turn. But my senses still felt soft, dull. My hands clenched around the armrests. I didn't want to get caught with my guard down again.

I turned my face to the window, hoping to distract my thoughts with watching the scenery pass outside. But it was too dark, and all I saw was my own dim reflection, gray eyes flicking back and forth. For a second, the shadows pulling down on my face made it look gaunt, skinny — and for a second, I was looking at myself from a year ago, small and sick, breathing through an oxygen tank.

Then I blinked, and it was the other me again. Short hair, full face, scar. I couldn't decide which one I preferred, which to flinch away from.

No, no, stop. I made myself close my eyes, pushed the intrusive thoughts from my mind, and fell into a restless sleep.

✮✮✮

Five minutes.

The face in the mirror blinked back at me. Her eyes were a dull gray. All the life had already been choked out of them.
My expressions only showed exhaustion now. If you looked closely, you could see the bags under my eyes, beneath the bruising. A cut across my nose. Blood dripping down over my lips and onto my chin. More drying along my hairline by my right temple. New bruises on my left cheek, a collection to the healing green ones around my neck.

My tongue felt thick in my mouth. I hadn't drunk anything in seven hours.

I hadn't eaten in thirty.

This was my first break since.

I bent over the sink, turned on the rusty faucet. Water gushed out — freezing cold and tasting slightly less metallic than my blood. After wiping the blood from my face (new wounds stinging), I cupped my hand under the faucet, gathering as much water as I could drink.

I should go slow. I didn't want to. But I learned after the first time, when I came back from the ring and made myself sick. My stomach couldn't handle the water.

Of course, if I went slow, that meant I didn't have enough time to drink all the water to quench the thirst that raked at my throat.

But throwing up that water would just be worse.

So, I went slow.

Bang!

Someone slammed their fist against the door behind me. "Time's up, let's go!"

I exhaled through my nose, turned off the faucet. I straightened, wiped at my face with my sleeve. I stared at my reflection for a moment longer. Every time I came in here, I was met with something worse.

I stopped feeling surprise a long time ago.

Without a word, I stepped away from the mirror, opened the bathroom door. It was dingy, a small closet of a room; one sink, one toilet, an open shower with no curtain; the walls were a gray cement, cold and unforgiving. But this room was the only solace I had, the only place where I could be alone — safe, untouchable.

Except, of course, sleep. But I hadn't been sleeping well in a while.

As soon as I opened the door, a hand reached in, grabbed my arm, and yanked me out. The hand belonged to a guard assigned to escort me; big, brutish, not much of a talker. Just how the Chairman liked it. He pushed me ahead of him, forcing me back into a walk. Sometimes my legs were sluggish when they had to obey an order I didn't like; or maybe I was just exhausted after nearly a whole day of training. At this point, it was hard to tell. I decided on the former possibility, because I still had one iota of spite left in me.

I didn't recognize this particular guard, although he seemed to know me. Under his breath, I heard him mutter, "Taking too damn long..."

Iron bars and yellow, flickering lights.

It was strange how those small things were what kept me grounded in my body. Sometimes it felt my
thoughts were hanging by a thread, ready to flit off at a moment's notice.

My eyes were still focused on the lights when they pushed me back into the ring. A single lamp swung gently from its cord above, giant yellow light bulb buzzing and casting a wide circle across the sunken floor. I nearly stumbled on the steps, my feet skidding on the concrete, run smooth by the hundreds of fights that occurred here before me.

Before me stood Brandt. Like me, she wore a tank top, only black instead of white. Perhaps to hide the bloodstains, which stood out on mine. And unlike me, her pupils glowed.

I caught my balance, readied myself. Forced myself to meet her eyes. Brandt cracked her knuckles and grinned.

"Идти!" *Idti.*

Go.

As soon as the invisible voice sounded, Brandt lunged.

I took her first strike to the chin but didn't drop. If you can't dodge a blow then you absorb it and never stop. Instead I rolled with it and drove an uppercut into her kidney, then her gut. She huffed, but didn't stop, keep throwing more blows at me and forcing me back, inch by inch.

Brandt always volunteered to go first.

It wasn't really a question of why. She loved having the first go at me. To break me down so hard and fast that I couldn't rise to fight the next challenger. It's always happened a few times. Probably something Brandt prided herself in, as she was the only Extremis soldier capable of it.

I tried to duck around her, feeling myself pressing back against the edge of the ring. If I stepped out of bounds, I'd still lose.

Brandt, as if anticipating this maneuver, grabbed my arm and used my own momentum to flip me over her shoulder. With a short cry, I landed hard on my back.

Just to add insult to injury, Brandt kicked me as I was down. Another bruise against my ribs. The air left my lungs. Brandt said something but I didn't catch it.

Still struggling to breathe, I swept my foot, knocking Brandt's legs out from underneath her. I couldn't get up, so I might as well bring her to my level. She landed on her back, and a surge of air entered my lungs, I threw myself at her, going for the throat.

It wasn't my typical move, but something had overcome me then. I'd already been doing this all day. I was starving, beaten, so thirsty. Delirium would surely get me soon if something didn't change. And a tiny part of me was just sick of it all.

Brandt lifted her arms to protect herself but I knocked them aside, landing a fist across her face once, twice, three times. It was sloppy and savage — this was before I had spent most of my time with the Winter Soldier, when he taught me discipline and efficiency. No, I didn't know what was to come after this. I still had to learn my first lesson: survival.

And Brandt was the perfect teacher.

I actually got my hands around her throat, which never happened before. I didn't really get a chance to feel victorious about it, I felt a sudden burning sensation against my hip — Brandt's hand, molten,
trying to shake me off.

I let out a hiss of breath, but didn't let go, my hands struggling to keep their grip. Brandt, too, was choking, but there was a delighted grin on her face — she was enjoying this, even as I tried to kill her.

The smell of burnt skin met my nose and I recoiled instinctively. My hands loosened, just enough. Brandt hefted upwards, slamming her elbow into my trapezius and kicking me off.

The pain was immense. I felt like I'd been stabbed in the neck; my right shoulder seized and went numb immediately — I couldn't bring up my hand to brace my fall, and landed hard on that same shoulder.

And then it was me being choked. I writhed, right arm still partially useless, and Brandt put her whole weight on top of me. She liked this part, I was sure. Choking was personal, slow, up close. Maybe she wanted to see the life drain from my eyes. I knew I did when I had her.

Burning hands around my throat, squeezing. I could hear the calls and jeering of the watching crowd but couldn't make sense of it. If I didn't fight back hard enough, the grip would get tighter, until I passed out.

Or maybe they'd let her kill me.

Then someone blew a whistle, and Brandt finally relinquished. I gasped, rolling over on my stomach. Lungs stinging, hip burning. That felt really bad. I couldn't make myself look at it. My vision shifted hard at the rush of dizziness meeting me, and I watched, head bowed as Brandt's feet sauntered away from me. The sound of laughter and high-fives rang in the air. Beneath it, disappointed muttering. I was losing my edge.

I hated falling to her. Not just because of failure. Maybe it was a point of pride for me, too. She always jeered and laughed with her buddies after taking me out — if I could at least take that away from her, that moment of victory, then I'd be satisfied.

Briefly, I wondered if I gave up now, if they'd go easy on me. I couldn't fight much more after this. I needed to recuperate. To eat. They'd have to let me eat at some point, right?

But I didn't know that for sure. It was just as likely they'd kill me.

And I wasn't going to let Brandt have that satisfaction, either.

Pressing my hand against the blistered burn on my hip, I took a deep, shuddering breath.

Then got off my hands and knees and stood again.

✮✮✮

The sun hadn't yet broken the horizon when I woke with a jolt.

I had been drifting in the twilight between dreams and wakefulness, slowly coming to when I vaguely remembered my phone. Like a clap of thunder, thoughts of Aunt May and missed calls hit me, and I nearly had a heart attack.
Whipping out my phone, I was relieved to discover no notifications on my screen. I sighed, slumping in my seat. Not even six o'clock yet and I was already losing my mind.

The dream left me a little shaken, and I was glad when the bus finally stopped thirty minutes later — I needed to get up and move, walk off the stress.

Peter was still a little groggy, though, and yawning we stood together at the bus stop, staring at Rose Hill, Tennessee in the early morning light. Soft hues of yellow, pink, and purple painted the sky over the Smoky Mountains, surrounding the little valley town. The buildings were so small and quaint — brick buildings and paneled sides. The tallest structure was the free-standing water tower in the distance. A flock of Canadian geese passed overhead.

A single red truck on a rusted carriage rumbled by. There was no one on the streets. Peter and I were the only ones who got off the bus here.

We looked around uncertainly. Where the hell were we going to start looking?

Peter, thankfully, had a great plan. "I'm hungry."

I looked at him, then said. "Well, let's go find someplace to eat, then."

There was a small 24hr diner down the block, with early, tired patrons that didn't give the two of us second looks when we walked through in the door, tiny bell jingling overhead. We had barely picked a booth before Peter's head dropped against the table. I had to kick him awake when the waitress came by for our order.

When she left, Peter rubbed his face and muttered, "Okay, so where do we start looking here? I don't think we should just go asking around if people've seen Tony Stark."

"Yeah, kind of a dead giveaway," I replied, taking a sip of water and glancing about the place. It was a bit of a shock to see half the people eating at the counter had guns on their hips or in shoulder holsters, just out in the open like that. But they were normal, overweight, middle-aged — no chance of being Extremis, and so nothing to worry about. "We'll have to do it the old-fashioned way."

"Pull a Scooby-Doo and look for clues?" Peter raised his eyebrows.

"I guess." I said, shrugging one shoulder. "We can check the motels, garages, places like that. A part of his suit is still here to send a signal, so it's gotta be around here somewhere, hopefully him with it."

"He'll need a big enough place to hide something like that without being seen." Peter nodded to himself, studying the linoleum tabletop. "You think Mr. Stark is still looking for a way to fight back? To rebuild, maybe?"

"I wouldn't be surprised. He's not stuck in a cave with a box of scraps."

So we had a hearty breakfast of bacon, sausage and eggs. Peter had a massive appetite — we ended up leaving a large tip and left without too much disturbance. The sooner we started, the sooner we'd find Stark. But stepping out onto that street, it occurred to me just how difficult that would be.

Peter and I looked around. As the sun rose higher, the streets became livelier, with traffic and stores opening. We got a few looks on the sidewalk but no one paused too long. There was a chill in the air, a light dusting of snow on the ground. Muffled Christmas music started playing in the distance. The town was coming alive again.

A commotion to my right caught my attention.
A group of kids were gathered outside a hardware store. Three boys, around the age of eleven or twelve, circling a smaller blonde boy wearing a NASA cap. He was all hunched up over a paper bag clutched to his chest, which the bigger boys were trying to take from him.

"C'mon, Keener, show us what's in the bag!" One of the boys said, a hand fistng in the smaller boy's shirt.

"Leave me alone!" The boy tried to wriggle away, but he was pinned against the storefront windows.

"What are those, Christmas presents for your family?" The second one demanded.

"Some lame presents!" The third boy sneered, shoving the small one against the glass. "Wiener Keener can't afford jack shit!"

"C'mon, give it up!" The first boy grabbed the paper bag and pulled a rip down the side.

"No! Stop!" The Keener boy complained. "It's for my friend!"

"Hey! Hey, cut it out!" Peter was storming across the street before I could say anything. All four boys whirled around to face him, and the three bullies scattered before he could reach the other side. "Yeah, that's what I thought!"

Heaving a sigh, I jogged after him, a little annoyed with him, but more with myself for not acting sooner. When I caught up, he was already trying to soothe the Keener kid, to rather questionable results. "Hey, dude, you okay?"

"Fine," the boy muttered, shrugging off Peter's hand and turned away from us with his bag of mystery. "Just wanna go home…"

And before Peter could get any more out of him, the boy ran off down the corner.

"Well, uh," Peter blinked, then turned to me. He looked just as confused as he was disappointed. "That was kind of dumb. He didn't even say thanks."

"The burden of a superhero," I said in mock sympathy, then punched him lightly in the arm. "C'mon, Webhead, we've got an Avenger to find."

The town was small only in numbers and size of buildings. Land area? It had to be roughly the same size of Manhattan, with a lot of...empty space between. Small pockets of woods, so many backyards, a dozen warehouses and lumber yards.

And only one motel.

Since we weren't actually police or anything helpful like that, we couldn't actually take a look at their guest list. Luckily, there was a (not so legal) workaround, which involved Peter causing a distraction with the fuse box in the back of the building; while the owner went out to check the issue, I ducked inside to check the names on the list.

But no dice. I didn't expect to see Tony Stark's name — even he wasn't smart enough to sign in under his real identity, if no one recognized him to begin with. But the motel only had two patrons, and one was a mother and her kids and the other was a young couple. I even checked the room numbers afterwards to make sure — Tony Stark was not in the only motel of Rose Hill, Tennessee.

Which meant he must be hiding somewhere less...legit.
It made our job a little harder, but no less determined to find him. We asked around first, and when that gave us no leads, we started checking the abandoned places, things a single billionaire could hide with his special iron suit without being detected.

There were two closed factories and a scrap yard — the most likely of places he'd go, I figured. The places were large, spacious, provided shelter from the weather, and had plenty of supplies and tools in case Stark needed them. And considering the hours it took to scour each location, they would've made great hideouts...if Tony Stark had ever chosen them.

Clearly, I was not operating on the same wavelength as this guy. I could tell Peter was getting frustrated, too. How hard was it to find one man in a city south of a thousand people?

"Maybe he's not even here," Peter said eventually. We'd stopped briefly for lunch, several hours ago. The sun was already starting to set, and my gut was setting uneasy. We had resorted to exploring the town street by street, on the off chance of finding Stark drunk in an alley or something. "I mean, maybe it's a fluke. Maybe a piece of his suit just broke or fell off and gave off the wrong signal."

"Peter, he called you," I pointed out as we turned down an alley between a butcher's shop and a mechanic. "I don't think Iron Man's decapitated left toe plate can do that."

"But what do we do?" Peter asked. "It's getting dark. We need a place to stay."

"Well, there's always that motel," I said, my hand closing around the wad of bills in my pocket. "We can afford to stay a few days at least, until we find another lead. Until then, we run this one till it's dry. We got this far, right? I'm not risking grounding for life just to give up after one day —"

*Krack!*

The stoop light exploded directly in front of us. Peter let out a yelp, leaping nearly six feet into the air and directly into my arms.

"Hey!" A voice behind us shouted.

Still carrying Peter in my arms, I whipped around to stare at the small blond boy peering out of the alleyway, NASA cap shading his face in the evening light. In his arms was some sort of homemade firearm — composed of what appeared to be plastic hamster tunnels and PVC pipe duct-taped together. It took me a second to recognize him: The Keener boy from the hardware shop.

His eyes flicked between us nervously. "You're looking for someone, aren't you?"

"Uh," Peter and I exchanged glances. He had a vice-like grip around my shoulders and I was still too startled to drop him. I could only imagine how ridiculous we looked to this boy. "Yeah."

The boy narrowed his eyes. The barrel of his weapon was still aimed at us. Then he lifted it over his shoulder and jerked his chin. "Follow me."

Then he turned around and disappeared down the alleyway. He didn't even look behind him, apparently confident that we would listen. What the hell was going on? Was this really happening right now?

Peter and I just remained where we stood, utterly confounded.

After a moment, Peter called after the boy. "...Is that a potato gun?"
Future Mia...yes I am planning a sequel :P
We followed the Keener boy half-way across town. By that point, I was starting to wonder if the little heathen was pulling my leg.

"Should we really be listening to this kid?" Peter whispered up to me. "I mean, we don't even know who he is. And he shot at us."

"It was just a potato, Peter, relax," I said quietly. We maintained a distance of about twenty feet behind the kid, just to be safe. "He's not a terrorist. Besides, I wanna see where this takes us."

"Probably his lair of doom," Peter grumbled, then called out, "Hey, how much farther?"

"We're almost there!" the boy said, glancing over his shoulder. He seemed annoyed. "Stop complaining!"

Peter did a slight double-take. "Man, he's bossy."

It was nighttime when we finally came upon a small, single-story house. Its white paint had faded to a dull gray, chipped in places, with a flat roof that looked in need of some repairs. There was a light on inside, but the boy didn't take us to his front door. No, he went around the driveway, to the garage in the back. The place was ramshackle. Perfect place to hide Tony Stark.

Or dead bodies.

"You guys have to promise me to be quiet," the boy turned around to us just as he reached for the door handle. "He doesn't like loud noises. He kinda freaks out sometimes."

Peter and I shared a look. This could either be really good, or really bad.

Nevertheless, we nodded, and the boy pushed the door open, gesturing for us to follow.

I decided to go first, just in case. If was a trap, then Peter could run while he still had the chance. I could feel him clutching the back of my coat, trying to peer over my shoulder; I had to admit, I was a little scared, too. A gust of warm air hit me before I stepped inside — along with the smell of oil,
smoke, and a faint trace of ozone. It was brighter in here, and my eyes adjusted to the light source; a small wood stove in the far back of the room flickered red. In the center of the garage, beside a junker car, was a handmade workbench; some plywood stacked on top of old sawhorses and plastic crates. On top was a bright lamp with a magnifying glass.

And on the worn-out couch next to it, Iron Man.

My heart skipped a beat. At first, I thought it was really him — before I realized the arc reactor was dark, the suit slumped over as if it were in a drunken stupor. The faceplate had been removed, revealing an empty helmet. There was no one inside.

My shoulders drooped. Peter appeared next to me, still gripping the back of my jacket. His face fell. "Wait, that's...no, where's the rest of him?"

The boy had come up to the desk, slipping the potato gun off his shoulder and setting it next to the old laptop computer. He hooked a thumb over at the suit, "Oh, yeah, that's just Iron Man. He's sleeping right now."

I stared at the boy, wondering if this was supposed to be some big joke. "Who are you again? How did you find this?"

The boy blinked up at me through thick blond hair, making a face. "I'm Harley, not that it's any of your business, weird tall girl. And he found me, by the way. I didn't ask for this! Mom would kill me if she found out I was harboring a fugitive."

"Fugitive?" Peter and I repeated in unison, somewhat alarmed.

"Dead guy," Harley corrected himself with a half-hearted shrug. "Same difference."

"What? I can't believe this..." I shook my head to myself, unable to believe this. No, no, we did not come all this way just for Tony Stark's suit. That couldn't have been the only thing that led us here. There had to be more. Tony Stark had to be still alive. Someone had to have called Peter's phone. This couldn't have been all for nothing.

I was about to open my mouth and say as much, when there came a muffled clanging. Some curse words followed, unintelligible, and then the back door of the garage opened. Someone stumbled in, his arms full of what looked to be scrapped metal and a red diesel canister. The pile was so high it covered his head, and the man struggled to close the door behind him.

We all stared as the sight of this newcomer, as he tripped on a skateboard left on the floor, stumbled forward into the car, flattened out across the hood, and sent all his scrap scattering to the floor.

Tony Stark started cursing again, picking himself off of the car, running a furious hand through his hair. "Jesus, Mary, son of a —"

He looked up and froze. Eyes darting from Harley, to me, to Peter, to Harley, to Peter again.

For a moment, no one said anything.

Tony Stark held up one finger. I had never before considered the concept of a hillbilly billionaire until now; Stark was dressed in greasy jeans, a red plaid shirt, a vest from a local hunting club, and a camo baseball cap. There was a cut across his nose, bags under his eyes, looking dead on his feet, yet still very much alive. He hadn't taken his eyes off of Peter. "Um, Harley? If what I think I'm seeing right now is actually happening? It better not be."
"Uh," Harley looked to us, then back to Tony, utterly confused. He shrugged helplessly.

"Because," Tony Stark continued, walking stiffly around the car, finger still raised. He stared between the two of us, finger wavering as he squinted a little. Perhaps he thought we were some sort of dream.

There as an odd, fragile lilt in his voice, like a man at the end of his rope, just barely hanging on to his sanity. "Because, Harley, I do not want to be seeing the fact that my teenaged intern and his beanstalk friend are somehow standing in front of me, in only garage in Rose Hill, Tennessee, four hundred miles from New York City, that I happen to be living in, three days before Christmas!"

When Tony Stark finished, he had to take a deep breath; he had been speaking with rising intensity, hands shaking a little, coming to a stop by the desk and looking oddly pale.

Meanwhile, Harley said nothing; it was a rhetorical question.

A long pause followed.

Peter jerked a finger at me. "She's my cousin, actually."

I slapped my face.

"PETER." Tony Stark said at the same time, throwing his arms out and soundly extremely distressed. "Peter. What the hell are you doing here?"

"We here to rescue you, Mr. Stark!" Peter said earnestly, and I couldn't tell if he was happy to have found Tony or growing uncertain over Tony's reaction. "The Ten Rings are all over the news! Everyone says you're dead, but I knew you weren't! I knew you were still alive somewhere! And we found you! We want to help!"

"Yeah, I know all that," Tony Stark said, annoyed. "What I want to know is why you're not at home with your aunt. This isn't your game, kid, all right? You're not ready for this kind of fight. These are some really bad dudes trying to kill me, okay? Trust me, you don't want to be in this. I need you to go home before your aunt finds out and decides to kill me, too."

"What? Come on!"

"No! There's no 'coming on!'" Tony Stark snapped, making air quotes with his fingers. "Jesus, Parker, do you have any idea who you're dealing with?"

"Agent Brandt and Savin," I said, jerking my chin over my shoulder. "They work for the Komitet, the Chairman. They're helping the Mandarin try to take over America."

"What? How do you know that? Who are you?" Tony demanded, looking taken aback. He asked this last question at Peter, pointing at me. "Do you know her?"

"I just said, she's my cousin, the one I told you about?" Peter said, eyebrows pinching up in worry. "Mr. Stark, you've met her before."

"You had that interview with me," I added helpfully.

"I've had interviews with a lot of people," Tony shot me an irritated look. "You're gonna have to be more specific—" Then he scrunched up his face and waved a hand, "—Wait, wait, no, I think I remember now. The one that got kidnapped, then had a panic attack in my building. Yeah, I remember you now, beanstalk."
"Glad I made an impression," I muttered, decidedly less enthused now.

"Hey, she gets them, too!" Harley piped up, pointing at me with a smile, as if he just made a brilliant connection. I couldn't tell if he was being serious or just taking the piss out of Tony.

Judging from the look Stark shot at him, I assumed the latter.

"And so, what, you two just thought you're gonna run all the way to Tennessee, find me, and bring me back?" Tony turned back to us, hands on his hips like some disapproving dad. He shook his head, chuckling a little, but it had no humor in it. "No thank you, kiddos, I'm fine where I am. No one needs to know I'm still alive right now, they'll just try to kill me again."

Tony Stark started going around his desk, grabbing his face place, when he suddenly stopped again. "Wait, how did you find me?"

Peter blinked, confused. "You called us, remember?"

"Um," Tony Stark glanced away, then back to Peter, brows rising in confusion. "No."

"You didn't?" Peter and I exchanged looks. Even Tony and Harley were baffled. We all just stood there in mutual confusion. Peter shrugged and added, "Well, someone did. And then we used it to ping the location of your phone."

"How?" Tony demanded, flopping down on a stool, hands slumped in his lap. "The only way you could've done that is through my personal system, or JARVIS, on the main server, which is only located in Stark Tower..." Tony Stark's eyes widened. "Oh, no. You didn't."

Peter and I bared our teeth in equal smiles of shame and pride.

"You did." Tony Stark dropped his head into his hands. "You broke into my building. First the Mandarin blows up my house, I lose my suit, and now a bunch of teenagers can just sneak into my building whenever they want. That's it. I'm done for. The Stark name no longer bears any meaning. I'll just go lay down and die now."

Tony keeled over onto his desk and ceased to move. Harley leaned over and poked him in the shoulder. Failing to get a response, Harley concluded, "I think you broke him."

"And you!" Tony suddenly sat up, jabbing a finger at the boy, as if remembering to be angry again. "I thought we had a deal here. I crash on your couch, and you don't tell anyone. What happened to that, huh? Why'd you bring them here?"

"I dunno," Harley just shrugged. "They're out-of-towners. Why else would they be here?"

"It didn't occur to you that they might be — oh, I don't know — dangerous?"

Harley glanced at us, frowning as doubt flickered across his features. "Dangerous? They're just teenagers. And they helped me. How bad could they be?"

Tony just blinked at Harley, his face going slack, before rubbing his hand down over his eyes. It was clear he was not going to win any argument today. He sighed, shoulders slumping and leaned against the desk. He muttered something under his breath before looking up and saying, "Welp, that's just it, I guess, huh? Now if you don't mind, I have to go talk to a grieving mother getting drunk at the local saloon and make her relive one of the worst experiences of her life, so if you excuse me..."

"Wait, what?" Peter watched, baffled as Tony abruptly rose again from his seat, making his way
towards the door. Incredibly, Peter jumped in his way. "No, wait."

"Jesus, kid —" Tony came to an abrupt stop, rolling his eyes, flinching at little. He seemed to be holding himself back from further swearing. He held up his hands in a placating gesture, looking down at Peter and saying, "I have to do this, okay? I need to find out what was up with Chad Davis, figure out what the hell is going on here. You two can stay here with my little friend. Harley, make sure they stay out of trouble."

While Harley saluted, Peter once more jumped into Tony's way. "But we want to help!"

Placing both hands on Peter's shoulders, Tony Stark gingerly pushed him to the side before darting towards the door. "Thanks, but no thanks, kid. Trust me, it's not a big deal. I'll be back in, what, an hour? It's just a little recon. Relax and come up with a convincing argument on why I shouldn't call your Aunt by the time I get back."

And with that, he was out the door.

The three of us just stared as it slammed shut again. After a quiet second, Peter said, "Huh. I thought he'd handle that...better."

"You mean like an adult?" I asked dryly, quirking an eyebrow and crossing my arms. A part of me wasn't entirely surprised. Tony Stark running away from serious issues he didn't like to do ones he'd rather manage? Yeah, that sounded like something he'd do.

Turning around, I frowned at Harley. "W-Who's Chad Davis? He sounds familiar..."

Harley screwed up his face, flopping down on the couch next to Iron Man. Playing with one of the suit's hands, he said, "Some Army guy who used to live around here. Got kinda messed up in the war. Came back and blew up part of the town. Down where the supermarket is. Six people died."

"How long ago was this?"

"Ten months ago? Yeah," Harley nodded, and Peter and I exchanged knowing looks. "He made a bomb or something so big it left nothing behind. He's why Iron Man is here. I guess he's trying to figure out why Davis did it."

"I already know why," I muttered, then cursed under my breath. I whipped back around, going for the door. Slamming it open, I was already charging down the street by the time Peter and Harley caught up with me.

I should've known it as soon as I heard the name. Chad Davis, another Extremis soldier, dead before I could ever meet him. I remembered snippets of his name being spoken in the Crucible, the other soldiers discussing his death. A lost cause, a failed experiment. Once again, something had gone wrong and the Mandarin never made a claim to it.

"What?" Harley called after me, nearly slipping in the snow. The sky had gone dark and it was hard to see where there was ice or not. "What is it? Do you know what's going on?"

"Chad Davis was Extremis!" I called back. "He w-worked for the Mandarin, the guy still trying to kill Tony Stark. Killian invented the serum and created an entire army like Davis to help!"

"You think Mr. Stark is walking into a trap?" Peter asked, catching up next to me.

"I don't know, he could be," I said, my hands clenching and unclenching, breath puffing in the cold. We passed under a streetlight and I stopped to face both boys. "I thought Tony knew as much as we
did, but I was wrong. He doesn't know about Killian, or how these guys are detonating at random."

I thought I had explained myself when I told him about Brandt and Savin, but I had made a severe miscalculation. Tony Stark wasn't on top of this. He was barely scraping by. Living off the radar, faking his death, trying to get ahead of the Mandarin before the guy caught up on the scheme. And I had no idea how long that plan was going to last.

Even worse, Tony had disappeared from sight, and I had no idea which direction he went in.

"If we could trace Tony Stark with just his cell phone," I said, fixing Peter a look. "Then how hard would it be for the Mandarin to find him?"

A blink, then horror dawned upon Peter's face. "Or what if we led them right to him?"

"Shit." The three of us said in unison.

Peter and I looked at Harley. He feigned innocence. "What? I'm twelve. I'm not that much younger than you."

"You're not coming with us." I said almost immediately.

"Oh yeah?" Harley challenged, scowling up at me. He had to lean back a little, but still managed to keep his ferocity. He still had his potato gun. "Let's see you say that again with a potato in your face —"

"Hey, hey!" Peter quickly leaned over and covered the gun's muzzle with his hands. Looking between us with a pleading expression, Peter said, "There doesn't need to be any potatoes in any faces, okay? We all want to help Mr. Stark. We can do that better as a team. Harley, you need to stay back, okay, dude? You've got a gun, you'll be better at a distance."

Harley squinted at Peter, pursing his lips as he considered the reason behind that statement. Finally, he lowered his weapon and said, "Fine. But if I see any bad guys, I shoot to kill."

Well, there was no arguing with that. I had to strain not to smile at that. "Alright, fair enough. C-Can you show us where this 'saloon' or whatever it is Stark's h-heading to?"

"Yeah, sure," Harley gave us a curt nod, then turned on his heel and started running in the opposite direction. "Follow me!"

For such a short little guy, Harley was pretty quick on his feet, and I was slightly alarmed at how long this kid could go without needing a break. He wasn't even superhuman, but he sure was energized like one. Still maintaining a certain distance behind him, I whispered to Peter under panting breath, "You got your web-shooters, right?"

"Right here," Peter huffed, raising his wrist as he jogged next to me. He flashed me an uncertain look. "Really think I might need them? Now?"

"One thing I've learned from being on your own," I replied, focusing my eyes on the way ahead. "Is always be prepared for anything. There's no way we'll be dragging Stark home without a fight."

Harley led us down to Rose Hill's Main Street, still alive with activity. The streetlights had speakers that played some folksy Christmas music, and bright festive displays flashed in the windows of closed storefronts. The local bar, Walker's, seemed to be a hotspot tonight — pick-up trucks and vans were parked alongside the road, motorcycles clustered in groups around fire hydrants.
"This is it," Harley said, stopping by a sedan on the other side of the street. He gestured to the bar, saying, "Mrs. Davis usually gets drunk there every night. Kinda sad, I guess. But nothing bad ever really happens —"

Two gunshots, in quick succession, cut him off. The three of us jumped as the muffled screams suddenly filled the air, and the door to the bar burst open, a stream of panicked patrons scrambling out.

Among them, Tony Stark, his hands handcuffed behind his back. He turned around and shouted, "Hey, hotwings! You wanna party? You and me, let's go!"

For a second, I couldn't tell who he was talking to. I couldn't tell right away, as a car door slammed to my right. I looked over.

Savin, stepping out of his car. Pupils already glowing red. He threw a coffee cup over his shoulder.

Then out of the bar walked Brandt. Dressed in a skirt and blazer, gun in hand.

They both grinned, eyes on Tony Stark.

I swallowed, my stomach dropping. Rose Hill was about to turn into a battlefield.
Finally saw Infinity War, guys, hahahahahaha *flings all future plot ideas out the window*

In other news, I’ve officially decided any future sequels (If/when I get to them) will be surrounding Winter Soldier, Ultron, Civil War, SM: Homecoming, and Infinity War, in that order. I’ll probably combine Ultron and Civil War into one fic, and then Homecoming and IW into another. Rough idea at least.

Also thank you for all the reviews! I try to reply to the ones that I can, or ones with questions I can answer. I really appreciate all of you sticking out with this for so long xD Especially after this two month long hiatus.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

For three seconds, I could only watch, stunned. Brandt, pupils burning, skin molten, strutting out of the bar of screaming people. Tony Stark, hands cuffed behind his back, running like a scared wombat straight into Savin.

Savin, pulling out a pistol. Taking aim was what finally got me lunging into action. "Hey!"

Luckily, Harley was on the ball. Before I even reached Savin, the boy had fired his potato gun — nailing Savin right in the ear.

Savin’s recoiled, his shot going wide. Tony Stark dove for cover behind a gray sedan. Before Savin could recover and turn for Harley, I plowed my shoulder into him like a linebacker, slamming him back into the car he just stepped out of. The door crunched beneath him on impact.

Still on my feet, I made a sharp heel-turn and went for Tony. Over my shoulder, I called, "Peter, take care of him!"

"Got it!" Peter called, followed by a sharp Thwip! Savin, groaning, was just pulling himself out of the car when he took a face full of web, smacking him back into the car.

"Mr. Stark!" I called, sliding in behind the trunk of the sedan Tony Stark was currently crouched behind. Brandt was still walking up to us.

Stark looked up at me, alarmed, shoulders shaking as he struggled with the handcuffs still hindering his movements. "Beanstalk? What the hell —"
"Hey, that's the guy from the boat!" Peter called from somewhere behind us. More thwips, crunching, and grunts as Savin was besieged by the amazing jumping spider. 

Tony's eyes flicked from him to me with an increasingly distressed expression. "I thought I told you kids to stay put!"

I didn't bother to explain myself. Instead, I grabbed Stark's shoulder, turned him away. Grabbing the handcuff chain, I ripped it all off with a quick jerk of my arm. Metal tore apart easily in my hand, clattering to the tarmac. "You're welcome!"

Tony Stark spun back around, staring at his free hands in front of him, then back up at me, one eyebrow quirking up. "...Huh."

He might've said something more, but didn't get the chance — when I grabbed his shoulder again, forced his head down right before the sedan's rear light exploded. 

Tony yelped; The gunshot rang in the air and I shoved him back. Tony did a reverse somersault onto the sidewalk. At the same time, I launched to my feet, spinning around and intercepting Brandt. Hands went up, wrapping around the hot pistol, her hot wrist, and twisted as hard as I could.

Brandt let out a grunt as I plowed my shoulder into her at the same time, flipping her over my back as I kept a hold on her gun. Her skin, red and charred, blackened, before cracking off completely. With one last yank, I ripped off her hand.

The sight startled me so much I actually yelped and dropped the gun. It hit the ground and went off, right before I kicked it away. Then I wanted to kick myself. Stupid! I could've used that!

I didn't have time to dwell on regrets. I whirled around just in time to take a reformed fist to the face. 

Brandt sneered as I went down hard, my head cracking against the tarmac. Squinting through the pain, I managed to see Tony Stark disappear through a dark cafe while her back was turned. Good. At least he was out of danger. 

I, however, was still screwed. 

Brandt lifted her heel and slammed it down towards my face. I rolled out of the way as she said, "God! Damn! You! Always getting in my way!"

"Hey!" Harley's voice echoed somewhere behind me. I glanced over my shoulder to see him pointing at Brandt, gaping at me. "She has the same haircut as you!"

"Harley, get down!" Peter swooped in and tackled Harley before Savin could grab the kid, swinging away again down a side street. 

Back to Brandt — pushing myself back to my feet, I avoided another kick to the ribcage. My head was still ringing from the fall. I stumbled back, trying to recollect myself in time. I could barely remember what she said to me.

Pushing hair out of my face, I huffed, "Sorry, can't help it. Just another teenager with attitude."

It was a stupid line I heard from somewhere, couldn't remember it at the moment, but I hoped it was enough to distract Brandt for a moment longer. I wasn't good at quipping. If I wanted quipping, I would've brought Peter —

"A fucking nuisance is what you are!" Brandt snarled, kicking away the gray sedan as she came after
me, her movements slow but furious. Her pupils were so red they were almost white. Her decapitated hand had already completely reformed. She flexed it, as if just shaking off a muscle ache. "All that training, all that time in the Crucible! They told me you would be the best of us! They told me all the effort will be worth it! A loyal and obedient soldier that would never turn! You know what I got instead? A disappointment!"

With that, Brandt bent down, slipped her hand under the sedan's bumper, and slung the car at me.

"Shit!" I ducked and rolled, hands over my head, as the car when careening across the street behind me. The sound of metal screeching and civilians screeching followed.

Back to my feet, I narrowly avoided the follow-up volley of a molten street trashcan — the corner dinged me across the shoulder and I nearly tripped on the curb. Son of a bitch!

"Well, I'd apologize, but that'd just be lying." I called back, scanning the area for anything I could use. People were still fleeing the area. Brandt dragged her hand along the line of parked cars, setting off their alarms in a rising cacophony. I'd hoped I'd given Tony enough time to return with back-up, but I had the sinking feeling I was on my own here. "And honesty is part of the soldier's code of honor, right? Or did we skip that class in the Crucible?"

I had been backing up the entire time, further down the road, away from both Tony and Savin. They had completely disappeared from sight, along with Harley and Peter. I hoped they were safe. Right now, it was just me and Brandt, duking it out in the middle of Main Street, Rose Hill, Tennessee.

Not my idea of a final showdown, but what can ya do.

Brandt just laughed. "Stall all you want, Amelia, but you can't delay the inevitable. Every time we meet, you keep running away, but there's gonna be a day where you can't run anymore. The Crucible will catch up. They will always find you. And when you run out of places to hide, you're going to wish you gave yourself up all those weeks ago in Sokovia."

My back hit the brick wall of the storefront behind me. Brandt was closing in.

Our eyes locked. I clenched my jaw. "Who said anything about hiding?"

And I slammed my foot into the fire hydrant next to me.

A geyser of freezing water exploded from the busted cap — striking Brandt full on in the face. She let out a shriek, knocked off her feet from the blast.

Now with Brandt on the ground, I lunged for her. It got me soaked in the process, but I wasn't cold, and it was worth the advantage.

Breathing hard, blood pounding. Hands around her throat, skin chilled and hardened by the water. Her kicking and struggling underneath me.

Just like the nightmare. Except nothing at all was the same.

My jacket hung heavy from my frame, pulling at my hair and shoulders. Shows soaked instantly, leaving me with the uncomfortable sensation of clingy wet socks. My knees grating against the pavement as I pinned Brandt down. A pair of steaming hands wrapped around my wrists, trying to yank me off. But Brandt couldn't hurt me, and I wasn't scared of her. I wasn't going to run. I wasn't going to hide. I came here for a reason. And this was where it was going to end.

One way or another.
The thought, as soon as it hit me, sent a chill through my veins so frigid not even the icy water could compete.

Brandt kicked and choked, gasping for air, trying to speak but unable to. She slapped my arm, begging for me to yield.

God. I could kill her.

I wanted to kill her.

And who would stop me?

The answer came to me just as a truck came careening down the street.

I saw the headlights at the last second. I tried to get up in time.

The grill clipped me just as I tried to jump out of the way. But at forty miles an hour, it's never just getting clipped. The impact sent me flying down the street.

My fall was only softened by landing not the flipped sedan Brandt had thrown earlier. Its metal undercarriage bent as I bounced off and crumpled to the tarmac.

I looked up just in time to see the truck, which had hit the brakes upon striking me, get blasted forward onto its front wheels. It had run over Brandt and paid the price.

All I saw was the driver's terrified face right before the truck skidded on its front wheels into the busted sedan. With a cry I scrambled out of the way. Something warm was seeping down my face. My shoulder felt pretty fucked up from my near-death experience with Ford Motors.

The truck tipped and landed on its side, crashing into the sedan before finally coming to a stop. It hit an electric pole and knocked it over, the lines coming down with an ominous crackle. A transformer exploded.

I stared at the wreckage, astounded. Fuck. The road was completely blocked now.

The driver, still alive, struggled to pull himself out the broken window of his vehicle. On the other side, Brandt was getting up — tire treads across her face and chest. It would've been funny if it weren't for the look of murder on her face.

"Now that," she sneered, wiping at her lip as her crushed head reconstructed itself. "Was not Amelia Fletcher. Amelia Fletcher isn't a killer. You think I don't recognize that look? That of someone who could end a life without a second thought, without an inch of regret. I see it every time I look in the mirror. At least I don't lie and hide it behind a poker face."

I swallowed, hesitating for a second before double-backing along the street, away from the wreckage and the still-escaping driver, hoping to draw Brandt away from him. She was too close now. My clothes were too heavy, wet, rubbing in all the wrong ways.

"That's why you can't escape the Crucible, Amelia," Brandt continued, clearly enjoying this triumph. "Because it's been inside you all this time. A parasite in your brain, eating away at you, all that's left of you, until all your thoughts, dreams, and instincts belong to it. And it's already won."

My throat was thick; I couldn't think of anything to say. Instead, in a moment of building frustration, I finally ripped off my jacket — the feeling of my now-unhindered arms gave me a brief moment of respite, enough to clear my head.
I matched Brandt's sneer with one of my own. "Do you ever shut up?"

She snarled and lunged at me.

This time I was ready.

One thing I was starting to learn about Brandt was that she always telegraphed her punches — and this one was no different.

My first move was to pull out my pocket knife, which was exactly what I did — killer instinct or not, I wasn't going to put moral superiority over my own life. Fuck that.

Caught her punch in one fist, snapped out my knife in another. Slammed it into her side, between her two lower ribs.

Brandt grunted, ripped her hot fist out of my hand and swung the other at my head. I jerked back, avoiding it and yanking out the knife at the same time — the metal already hot and steaming from contact. I had to force myself to keep holding onto it, taking two blows to my chest and hip before slashing back.

Missed the first time, but the second slash cut across Brandt's arm as she tried to block. It sliced through her skin easily. But even as I readied for another strike, her skin pulled back together, healing almost instantly.

Brandt just gave me a molten grin. It didn't even look like it hurt.

Pow. Fist to the face, knee to the gut. I barely had the strength to remain standing. Stumbling back, my shoulder hit a parked truck behind me. I saw Brandt's incoming fist and, withholding the urge to upchuck, ducked and rolled.

I slipped past her legs as her fist went through the driver's window. Shattered glass went everywhere. I turned around just as I heard the sound of metal tearing. Brandt whipped her arm back out, slinging at me the gear stick she tore out.

It glanced off my arms when I raised them, protecting my face from a messy end.

The smell of singed cloth reached my nose. I had no idea how badly she burned me, but I could feel the places where she'd struck. Pulsing, stinging. Brandt was still rearing to go — nothing I did seemed to phase her.

When Brandt came at me again, I tried going for her knee. But apparently, she anticipated that, as when my blade embedded into her exposed skin, she just enclosed her fist over it, yanked it out, and held on.

For a split second, terror kept me frozen, until Brandt let go with a shove. Knife still in my hand, I looked down to see that she had melted the entire shaft of the blade, turning it into soft, cooling mess. No longer sharp enough to stab or cut with.

Shit.

I retaliated by stomping on her foot, then bringing my elbow down on her head. I refused to let the knife go. As far as I was concerned it was still a weapon. After all, if it had been the Winter Soldier, he wouldn't have let it go until he had completely rendered it useless.

Brandt recoiled from the blows, her exposed toes getting the worst of it, but they too healed as she
stepped back.

Roundhouse kick to my head. Again, telegraphed, too flashy — I caught her heel before it met my face and twisted her foot off.

That just grew back again in the next few seconds. It didn't even knock Brandt over. It just made her angrier.

I absorbed the next three blows; left arm, right thigh, face. My muscles were starting to burn with effort. Goddamn, I was already feeling fatigued, and help still seemed like it wasn't coming. I wished for a gun, for something, just blow Brandt's head off, but now I wasn't sure if even that could finish her off.

Brandt charged at me, her arms out. Hot, melted knife still in my left fist, I flipped it, reverse grip, and slammed it into the back of Brandt's shoulder as she tackled me.

We went down hard. She let out a cry. My bare arms and shoulders scraped against the cold tarmac as Brandt landed on top of me.

And didn't move.

Gasping, I managed to peer up. My hips and back stung with road rash, shirt riding up, but that was nothing compared to the sight of my knife sticking out of Brandt's spine at the base of her neck.

I gasped, suddenly able to hear the blood pounding in my ears, even though it had been there this whole time. In a surge of panic and relief, I pushed Brandt off of me, scrambling away and to my feet. From there, I was better able to see what I had done.

"You...you bitch." Brandt spat, panting hard and spluttering, in either pain or shock. Hard to tell which. She just lied there on the ground where I shoved, arms splayed out, limbs unmoving. "You f-fucking paralyzed me."

I didn't really feel all that bad about it. I was just surprised at how fast it was over. Sometimes the best finishing moves were the quickest ones.

I just leaned forward, hands on my knees, taking a second to catch my breath. I hung my head, almost laughing. Was it...was it over yet?

**CRREEEEEEAAAAAAAKK.**

The long groan of fatigued metal breaking rattled through the air, so deep it shook the ground. Brandt and I froze, staring at each other wide-eyed before spinning around to see —

The water tower, less than a block away, toppling.

Its long, spindly legs pulling and pending, its massive top-heavy basin tipping forward and down — towards Main Street. Towards us.

The water tower landed with a tremendous crash. I barely had time to drop the ruined knife and start running before the tidal wave came pouring over the rooftops.

I ran for the opposite end of the street. Maybe if I could make it up that building, I'd be safe —

But I'd never make it.

I felt the tickling of mist on my heels right before the wave slammed into my back. The water
swallowed me before I even got the chance to scream. Then I got slammed into the very brick wall I'd been intending to climb.

For three seconds, I couldn't breathe. Water surrounded me, kept rushing, forcing me against the wall. The left side of my face burned. Not from Brandt, but from the brick cutting into my skin. I was going to be so pissed if I ended up looking like the Golem from *Dragon Quest* after this.

Then, as quick as it began, it was over. The basin quickly emptied and soon the water was down to my shoulders, then my knees, before trickling away at my feet, draining further into town.

I slumped against the wall, choking and gasping for breath, clutching at my chest. I couldn't believe I almost drowned on dry land.

If I was wet before, I was completely soaked now. Dripping head to foot, my breath clouded in front of me, huddled on the ground in my bloody and torn shirt, I was actually starting to shiver. The adrenaline from the fight was wearing off, and now my body grew heavy. I slumped to the sidewalk, breathing hard. God, I could use a nap. And a warm bath. And some hot chocolate.

The air was quiet, aside from the slight crackle of electricity, the rushing of distant water, cheery Christmas jingle playing from tinny speakers somewhere down the street.

I rested my head against the wall, closing my eyes, just taking deep breaths. Maybe I could just fall asleep right here, wait for the authorities to arrive…

The sound of scraping had my eyes flying open.

I whipped my head around to see Brandt, spasming to her feet. Movements jerky, arms and fingers twitching, her head at the wrong angle. The knife still buried in her neck. Her eyes, burning pupils, pinned on me.

"...did you think…" Brandt snarled, lips pulled back in a savage smirk, no humor. She straightened up, back arched, limbs askew, a fiery marionette on twisted strings. "...that was going to stop me…?"

My heart skipped a beat and I jolted backwards, only to hit the wall behind me. My fingers were completely numb, frozen. I could only hold my hands out weakly in front of me. I tried to tell my legs to move, to get beneath me, to get up, but I was so tired, everything hurt, no more adrenaline, just wanted to lie down now…

Brandt hobbled forward on uneven legs, the water steaming off her as Extremis coursed through her body again, healing all the damaged nerves. But how much damage was too much? Had the knife cut too deep? Was it too late to remove it?

Her footsteps splashed. The street was still partially flooded. Between us was a large puddle, a river really, where the water remained thanks to a natural dip in the road. I remained dry (more or less) on the sidewalk, curled up and with nowhere to run.

"What, t-too tired to get up?" Brandt asked, clearly already guessing what was up. I was still pushing myself against the wall, trying to help myself to a stand. I had to fight her. I couldn't just die on my knees. "Why don't you just make it easy on yourself, Amelia? You can't last against me. You'll never be strong enough."

A light flashed in the corner of my vision. I didn't look at it, though. Just carried myself up against the wall — still putting too much weight on it, unable to stand on my own two feet.

Hands pressed against the brick. Hair dripping in front of my face. I didn't break eye contact with
Brandt.

"Good thing I don't have to be."

Brandt gave me a funny look, hesitating.

But not before she stepped in the puddle.

And that's when she saw it, too.

The car crash. The fallen electric pole.

The broken lines floating in the water.

The water was ankle-deep. Sparks flashed against her skin.

Brandt's eyes flicked to mine, her mouth open to scream. Only no sound came out. I had only a second to acknowledge this before diving for cover.

Her body began to spasm again, only uncontrollable, fast, skin growing white hot. Her face turned completely black as the matter underneath glowed like starbursts through the cracks.

A gun, overheating.

"N-no —!"

Brandt's scream cut off with a strange, inhuman shriek.

Then her entire body exploded.

The blast hit the sedan I hid behind with the force of what felt like a thousand suns. I gasped as the tires popped and glass exploded, car shifting against me. I covered my head and hunkered lower to the ground, praying I had put enough distance between us.

Whoosh.

The heat passed, leaving my skin feeling tingly and warm, and not in a good way. The part of my body not against the car was steaming dry, my hair actually a little static-y. The other half, still wet. The dry scent of ozone hung heavy in the air, coating my mouth in an almost numbing sensation, but stinging my eyes and nose. I tried to wet my tongue but found my mouth dry as paper, and unable to swallow.

It took me three long seconds to look past the car bumper, and see what remained of Brandt.

The puddle was gone. So was the front half of my car. All that remained was rubble, a blackened crater in the earth.

And one shiny button from Brandt's fancy blazer.

I slumped to the ground, head in my arms. Breath shuddering, tears came to my eyes unbidden. Finally, it was over.

"Mia?" A voice called my name in the distance, so far away and lonely. Then, sharp, and close, running footsteps. "Mia!"

Hands landed on my shoulders before I could even lift my head. My foggy brain had just identified
the voice when the hands lifted me up and I saw Peter, his expression gaunt with horror, panic. "Oh, my god, I thought you were dead!"

"Mmm, no," I mumbled, smacking my lips a little because my mouth was still dry. Maybe that blast messed with my head more than I initially thought. I gazed up at Peter through unfocused eyes. "I... I'm okay. Are you — is Harley —?"

"Harley and Mr. Stark are fine!" Peter informed me in words almost too fast for me to comprehend. Clearly, he was still in battle-mode, ready to fight. His face was covered in ash and I noticed his jacket pock-marked with new singed holes. Peter brushed at the errant hair in his eyes, adding, "I tried to keep the water tower from falling but I wasn't fast enough. I knew you were here and I just — god, I thought — I can't even think it. Are you sure you're okay? Jesus, all that blood, and you face is — what happened to that Extremis woman? Brandt? Where is she?"

I couldn't answer all those questions, still slumped on the ground. Peter supporting me was the only thing keeping me up. I just pointed one, slightly trembling finger down to the crater.

Peter stared at it for a long moment. Then to me. Then to the crater again. What remained of the water and the electricity pole. He seemed to piece it together on his own. "The electricity combined with the water must've overcharged her...how did you know that would work?"

I just gave him a dull look. My hand fell limp to the ground. "I didn't."

It took Peter a moment to absorb that and, perhaps not knowing what to do with that encouraging notion, simply shook his head and said to me, "Come on, let's get you up, before someone comes around and sees you."

"What? I do not need your help, Peter —" I complained, offended, as Peter began to lift me to my feet. My whining ended there, however, as Peter was stronger than he looked, and I lacked almost all strength to stand on my own. I ended up slumping against him, one arm over his shoulder.

I just hung my head, defeated, as he led me down the street. "At least tell me you killed Savin."

"Oh, yeah, Mr. Stark took care of him," Peter nodded emphatically, grinning a little. "One arc reactor blast to the face, bam! He was gone. You shoulda seen it, Goose, it was an awesome fight! Savin couldn't even touch me, and Harley came in clutch with his little Cricket grenade thing—"

"Yeah, real shame I missed it," I mumbled, basically just letting Peter drag me at this point. I looked over, saw my star tattoo on my exposed skin and jumped a little, saying, "Oh, shit, my jacket —"

"What?" Peter paused, turned around with me, scanning the streets for wherever I dropped it. Then he raised his free arm and with a quick Thwip! Snatched up my jacket from across the street with his web-shooter. Peter handed it to me with a grin. "Here, doesn't look too ruined. Although maybe you should let it dry first..."

I just laughed a little, taking the jacket and letting my arm fall again, exhausted. "Let's just get back to the garage. Tony Stark still doesn't know anything about Extremis or Killian."

"He probably has some idea now," Peter snorted. Already sirens were arriving. County police? How long did it take to get to a crime scene in the middle of a small town? The two of us ducked down a side street, back to Harley's house. Peter threw an anxious glance over his shoulder, then back at me. "You think we made the right decision in coming here?"

I wasn't sure how to answer that for a moment. All the trouble we caused, just getting here, just trying to tell Tony Stark what he needed to know. The lying, the sneaking, the fighting.
All that damage. The death.

Putting our own lives at risk.

I sighed. "I think it'd be a lot worse if we hadn't."

I would also like to thank and credit Kaeliee on DeviantArt (Glass in the Mirror on ff.net) for the new cover of this fic! It's such a wonderful piece and I still can't get over how awesome it is.

Chapter End Notes

N/A: I'm sorry if this chapter isn't as long as you expected, or as long as some previous chapters. I'm honestly just not aiming for that length anymore, its just a bit unrealistic for me now, and I think it slows down the pace of the story - which is definitely picking up now that we're nearing the end (finally).
"I thought I told you to stay here!" Tony Stark was absolutely furious when we returned to the garage.

The three of us stood around him, hangdog, in various stages of injury. Now under the yellow-green lights of the garage, I noticed Peter's split lip, bruised knuckles, and scraped up chin. Harley's clothes were burned, his potato gun melted to point of uselessness, and his face so thickly covered in soot and ash that his green eyes popped out like a jack-o-lantern. I had no idea how I looked; my entire body felt like it'd been through a blender. My right shoulder in particular felt pretty messed up, and there were burns all up and down my arms and hands. It all hurt too much to put my jacket on, which I wrapped around my fists.

"You all could've died, o-or worse!" Tony stammered. He himself wasn't looking too hot, either. He was favoring one leg and he had a significant lesion gracing his cheekbone and nose, layering on top of an already black and blue eye. His hair was even more awry than usual, and he still had a salvaged arc blaster gripped in his hand.

"This is exactly why I told you to go back to your aunts, I knew this would happen!" Tony snapped at Peter, then jabbed a finger at Harley. "And you were supposed to keep an eye on them!"

"What? They're bigger than me! And you were going to get roasted anyways!" Harley scoffed, wiping at his face and leaving long drag marks across his cheek. He wrinkled his nose at the soot that came away on his hand, then wiped it on his already-grease-covered shirt.

"Roasted? I was completely fine until you three showed up —"

"You were running out of a flaming bar," Harley snapped back. "In hand-cuffs! Farrah Fawcett had to rip them off!"

"Farrah what —" I blurted, half-offended and half-impressed Harley even knew who that was. Wait, did I never tell him my name?

"SPEAKING OF WHICH," Tony cut me off, accusatory finger switching to my face. "What the hell? Just — what? Explain!"

I gaped helplessly for a moment, holding up my hands in a silent plea for words. I didn't really know how to say it — not to a stranger like Tony Stark, or in front of a kid like Harley. Was now really a good time to get into angsty backstories? Peter had been hard enough. "I'm...a super soldier."

"I'm...a super soldier." It came out like a question, like even I didn't know. I made a face, cringing inwardly. That was not at all how I wanted that to come out.

Tony just stood there, speechless. He held my gaze for a long, unblinking minute.

Then his hand dropped, arm flopping to his side. "Huh. Okay, then."
My shoulders sagged, weirdly relieved. I didn't think he'd take that so well. Then again, Tony Stark was an Avenger. He'd met super soldiers, and far stranger things.

The relief was temporary, however, as Tony quickly recovered his former righteousness. "But that doesn't change the fact you still didn't listen to me!"

"Well, you didn't listen to us!" Peter retorted, surprising me with his angry tone. Peter's jaw tightened, fists clenched as he continued, "We came here to tell you that those Extremis soldiers are unstable, they work for the Mandarin, and that they were made by Killian!"

"K-Killian?" Tony paused, his face going ashen. "As in, Aldrich Killian? How do you know all this?"

"Because we ran into them in New York! I called you almost two weeks ago and you actually picked up! And I told you the exact same thing! Don't you remember?"

"Uh, v-vaguely…" Tony stammered, glancing away and scratching the back of his neck. At Peter's Aunt-May-Approved-Disapproving-Frown™, Tony backpedaled: "Look, kid, it was really late! And I wasn't in the best place mentally, emotionally… alcoholically…"

He ended with a face-palm.

"We're not dumb kids, okay?" I just threw my hands up, speaking in Peter's defense. "We're not here just for shits and giggles, cashing in on Iron Man's street rep —"

"Speak for yourself," Harley interjected.

"Anyways," I said through gritted teeth, cutting Harley a look. "We know what we were doing. It's not the first time we've been in danger. Or fought Extremis. The Mandarin's always been one step ahead of you, you still don't have a working suit, and everyone thinks you're dead. We knew we could help, so we did."

"First of all, debatable," Tony Stark snorted, holding up one finger, then two. "Second of all, it's a work in progress, so unless any of you know how to recharge my self-powered suit on nothing but potatoes and used car batteries — and I already know you don't — then you can all go home. Well, except you, kid. You live here, I guess."

Tony ended that with a sharp nod and planting his hands on his hips, as if that settled the matter.

Peter and I exchanged knowing looks, then turned back to him, speaking at once: "We're not leaving."

"I — what?" Tony blinked, apparently flabbergasted that we rejected his attempt at authority. Apparently not knowing what else to do, he once more pointed his finger, this time at the door. "I'm ordering you to leave! Right now! Go home before you keep getting hurt because of me!"

"And what, leave Harley on his own to do it all for you?" Peter pointed out, wrinkling his nose in distaste. "Let a ten-year-old take your punches for you?"

"Twelve!" Harley complained.

"No! Yes! I mean —" Tony dropped his head into his hands, letting out a long groan. "Fuck. Cap makes it look so easy…"

Harley let out a scandalized gasp, and threw us a melodramatic look of horror. "Iron Man said a bad
I just rolled my eyes and cuffed him on the back of his head. Harley snorted and ducked away, cackling into his hands.

"Alright, alright, fine," Tony said, bringing his head up again, eyes closed for a long moment. He inhaled deeply through his nose, perhaps summoning whatever amount of patience he had left. "If you're all gonna stay here and be dumbasses, you might as well be useful ones. Harley, get over here and help me with rebooting JARVIS. Parker, you know your way around a sautering iron? Get inside this chest plate and tell me what's wrong with my suit."

While Peter and Harley exchanged fist bumps, Tony Stark turned to me and said, "As for you, giant blonde — go sit outside."

"What?" I almost yelped.

"You heard me. Two's company, three's a crowd," Tony seemed completely unruffled by my outrage. "Besides, you caused the most collateral damage today and I don't want those super strong hands of yours touching any of my stuff."

"Collat — you knocked down the water tower on top of the entire town!"

"You're the one who helped set it on fire!"

"Oh, yeah, like you totally flooded the place on purpose!"

"Ah, dissidence! Antagonistic behavior!" Tony called, almost gleeful. "You're creating a hostile work environment — can't have that while the nation's in danger! Adios!"

"That's totally unfair —"

"Mia." Peter cut me off, leaning into me and speaking in a low tone. "Mr. Stark's already letting us stay. Maybe we should listen to him — he's the only one who knows how to fix his suit, anyways."

I met Peter's gaze with a glare, but his calm, if slightly wincing interjection prevented me from firing back. I didn't want to argue with him, too. And maybe he had a point. Dammit. I wanted to say I could help, but I didn't know a damn thing about Tony Stark's tech.

Fighting a grimace, I switched my glare to Stark, before turning on my heel and stalking out the door. On the way, I muttered under my breath, "Hmph. Not 'letting' me do anything…"

Tony shouted after me, triumphant. "Ha, see? You make my workforce uncomfortable —"

I slammed the door behind me, cutting off the rest.

✮✮✮

I sat on the frosted curb, glaring at a patch of black ice glimmering on the tarmac a few feet away. Angry thoughts swirled in my head, but the overwhelming feeling was regret and shame. I'd acted so childish, arguing with Stark, slamming the door like some kid who just got their Xbox taken away. And now I was pouting.
What a true, hardened soul I was.

Most of all, though, I felt useless. And lonely. At least the cold air was soothing on my burns, but I couldn't help but think of the boy's club happening inside the garage. Man, Peter must be having the time of his life right now, working right alongside his favorite hero on his famous suit of armor.

And here I was, left out in the cold. Literally.

Despite the fight earlier, the town had gone quiet. It was almost...cozy, the way the town just fell right back to sleep after that. Festive lights twinkled on rooftops around me, a plastic Santa on a nearby lawn swayed gently in the wind. Occasionally there was the sound of a revving engine in the distance, the drifting tunes of Christmas music, but besides that, all was silent.

I planted my chin on my fist, scowling at my scuffed-up boots. I was a super soldier. A fighter. Someone who broke things, not one who fixed them.

Like Tony Stark. Like Peter.

Maybe Brandt was right. Maybe killing, destroying was just in my nature now. The Crucible had irrevocably altered my entire being, consciousness included. I did let her die after all. Didn't particularly try to stop her from destroying herself. I wasn't ashamed of it, either. Not proud, but just...I accepted it. Just like on the train. Better them than me.

Something soft and heavy fell across my shoulders. A blanket. I jumped, startled, as Tony Stark sat down next to me on the curb. I hadn't even heard him approach.

Stark let out a deep sigh, running a hand through his hair as I plucked cautiously as the fleece blanket. "...I will admit, not my best decision to tell a kid to sit outside at night in zero-degree weather. My bad."

Brow furrowing, I glanced between him and the blanket. "Oh. Thanks. I guess."

"You know, I try to be a good person," Tony Stark continued, pressing a hand to his chest. He pursed his lips, squinting a little as if he didn't quite believe his own words. "Really, I do. I know it doesn't always come off that way. And I don't want you guys to get hurt, especially not on my account. I just...I don't really get kids. One of you is bad enough. But three? I'd probably lose my mind. I guess I'm like my dad that way. He couldn't even handle one of me."

I wasn't sure what the hell was going on right now. I had been angry earlier, but this sudden honest moment with Tony Stark was...well, it was weird. Weird enough I forgot why I was angry for a minute.

So, I raised my eyebrows and nodded along. "One of you is a lot."

"Exactly! And you know what, I'm starting to understand him a little bit more," Tony nodded enthusiastically, apparently pleased that I agreed. "If you were my kids, I'd send you off to ten years of boarding school, too!"

"That sounds...awesome." I said lamely. What else was I going to say?

"But I wouldn't, and you wanna know why?" Tony Stark asked, giving me a significant look but not waiting for me to reply. "Because as much as I suck at dealing with kids, I know that shoving them away in a corner won't help them. My dad tried it, and it just made me worse. The last thing I need — or want — is more of me happening in the world."
"Is this an apology?" I asked skeptically.

"What? No, I already apologized." Tony said, shaking his head as if I was just distracting him. "I just — I know you've been through some shit, Mia. I knew it when I saw Bruce helping you up. Like a girl who can punch through walls gets a panic attack over a job interview. It's always more than that."

I pulled the blanket around me to cover my arms. Damn, so he really did remember what happened at Stark tower. (I knew I had been memorable!) I wasn't quite ready to be reminded of it, though. Or the fact that he'd seen through my act so easily, so early in the game. "Oh. Is this about the super soldier thing?"

"Ye— no. Maybe. Honestly, I'm not sure," Tony sighed, dropping down next to me on the curb. His voice sounded easy, but his shoulders were tense, as were the expression in his eyes when he met my gaze. "Don't get me wrong, that's fucking weird, but in the grand scheme of things, not the most important detail. Mia, I need you to tell me everything you know. Starting right now."

I nodded, my hands twisting together nervously. It took me a moment to just...prepare myself. It was like when he asked me earlier, how I could do what I did. This wasn't like with Peter, who had just come out with his own massive secret after years of being my family and friend. This was Tony Stark. Iron Man. Avenger. A guy who'd seen the end of the world and came back to tell about it. How would he react to my story?

I guess I was about to find out.

So, for the next half hour I spoke, explaining Brandt and Savin, their creation, Killian's whole deal, and his ties to the Mandarin. Tony Stark occasionally asked a few questions, but for the most part he just listened, hands tucked under arms, eyes on the ground. I couldn't tell if he believed me or not, but Stark seemed to be considering my words seriously. I had no other proof besides.

When I was finished, there was a stretch of silence. My knuckles were white, clenching my fists so tightly around the blanket my fingers were starting to tingle. It wasn't exactly pleasant to be talking about this, but my comfort in the matter was of less importance than the threat Killian and the Mandarin posed.

At long last, Tony Stark finally said, "And I bet they're the same people that did that to you, huh?"

"What?" I asked, blinking up at him.

Stark just raised his eyebrows at me, then gestured to my exposed shoulder. The star. "I'm supposed to believe you just got that tatt out of some misguided-but-well-intentioned love for Sum 41? And not actually, like, Communist Russia? I'm not saying I know what's going on with you, or why a teenager possibly aligned with a defunct government would want to save Iron Man, the coolest Avenger, but I do know a survivor when I see one. This world that we're in? Completely FUBAR. That's why it's my job, and people like us, to live just one more day, all for another chance to fix it."

I did a double-take. "Is this a pep talk? Because we're the ones that saved you, not the other way around."

"Excuse you, Beanstalk, who's the older one here?" Tony Stark raised his eyebrows, pointing at his face. "That's right, me, which means I have a commodity on pep talks and inspiring my underlings to do great things. So just answer the damn question: did Killian do this to you?"

Eyes on the ground. I picked at my nails, shoulders hunching up. "...No, not really. I mean, he
probably helped b-but — no. It wasn't him."

"You got any other secret powers up your sleeves? Because from what I've seen so far, you're a lot like this other guy I know. Likes to wear stars, too. Except a little more patriotic. And bossy."

I threw Stark a look. I didn't have to ask who he was talking about. "What you see is what you get."

That actually made Tony laugh a little, smacking his knee. "Oh, that's good! That's good stuff. So, you're just gonna leave it like that, huh? No deep explanations on how some eighteen-year-old girl —"

"— Fifteen —"


"I'm not a Communist. I didn't want this tattoo."

Tony Stark opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again. Then raised a finger. "...You know, this is gonna sound kinda mean, but that just raises more questions than I'm emotionally prepared to ask right now. Sorry."

"What a great pep talk. Wow." I said, completely deadpan. "It really feels like you understand what I'm going through."

"Alright, fine, you know what? This is the way I see it," Tony Stark rolled his eyes, apparently losing his patience with my sarcasm. He held out both his hands between us. "You've got two options here, Fletcher. You can either get crushed under the weight of your past, or put it beneath you and use it to stand a little higher. You're never going to get rid of it, no matter how much you forget, so might as well use it to your advantage, yeah?"

"...I-I guess." I mumbled, adjusting the blanket around my shoulders. It stung against my skin a little, but I found those words to be more startling, somehow. I frowned as the words came apart and pieced themselves back together again in my head. Picking them apart. Figuring out why they hit me at the core with so much force I actually felt it in my chest, tightening around my lungs and heart.

There was a wisdom there I didn't expect. Not from Tony Stark. Still, I found myself sorely confused and helpless. "But how do I do that?"

"Pfft," Tony Stark just made a raspberry and shrugged. "Hell if I know. We all got our ways of dealing with our shit. Me, its building a tin can to walk around and shoot tank missiles with, and its broke right now. I definitely wouldn't recommend that solution to you."

"But Peter running around in a suit and mask is okay, for his shit?" I demanded.

"The kid stops runaway trains and purse-snatchers, not psychotic terrorists and foreign tyrants," Tony replied, with an aggrieved expression, his lips pressed flat. "That's Parker's wheelhouse, okay? I trust him to keep the little people safe. And he's good at that. Hell, he loves it. Who am I to judge? Who are you to judge, Miss America?"

"God, don't call me that," I groaned, hiding my face behind my hands. It was better than admitting he had a point.

"Fine, I won't. But you could follow his example. Or maybe you could do something different," Tony suggested. "Whatever it is, don't drown yourself in your past. I've been there, okay? It's a dark
place, and once you're there, it's tough to get out of, and feels just as impossible. So, don't start." he paused, then smacked himself. "Dammit, I sound like an anti-smoking ad now. Rogers would be living if he heard me just now. Anyways, do you get what I'm telling you, Mia?"

I looked up at the twinkling roof tops. Slowly, I started to nod. "Yeah, I think so. Don't drown. Stand up."

"Good," Tony seemed relieved, and for a second, I thought that was the end of it, but then he placed a hand on my shoulder. Bowing his head, Tony Stark added, "And I'm not just telling this for your own health. I don't want Peter to see you go down that road, either. You weren't there, but you should've seen the way he tore himself up about you when you were gone. The kid worries about you more than himself. He blames himself for enough already. You two both deserve better than what life gave you, but I think you're both strong enough — stronger together — to get through it, make something better out of what you got."

The skin on my back and down my arms itched at those words. A sudden burning behind my eyes, and I turned my face towards the opposite end of the street. I knew Peter liked to talk to Tony Stark about his life, but I never knew that.

"Okay!" Before I could think of any decent reply to that emotional bomb, Tony Stark suddenly let go of my shoulder, clapping his hands together as if he just completed the dishes. "Pep talk over. Phew. That wasn't too hard. Now back to our regular hour of teenage angst."

It was such a sudden and cavalier end to the whole moment that I almost got angry again. Was Stark really just gonna leave me like that? I turned back to him, opening my mouth to be a smart-aleck, or just pissed off, but before I could get a word out, another voice called out.

"Guys!" Peter rushed out of the garage, panting, cheeks red. "Th-the Mandarin! He's on TV!"

✮✮✮

We stood around the old CRT TV in front of the couch, watching in stiff, frozen dread.


"Mr. President." Headshot of the Mandarin. No sunglasses. Just dark, cold eyes staring into camera. Despite the title, appeared Caucasian. "Only two lessons remain. And I intend to finish this before Christmas morning. Meet Thomas Richards."

Wide shot. The Mandarin on his throne, decorated with pulled pierced MP helmets resting on statues of Chinese dragons. An antique telephone on a side table on frame right. And, at the Mandarin's feet, a middle-aged businessman, trembling as he lied on his side, eyes focused on the camera in terror. The Mandarin pointing a pistol at his head.

"Good strong name. Good strong job," The Mandarin continued. "Thomas, here, is an accountant for the Roxxon Oil Corporation."

Close-up of Thomas Richard's weeping, pleading face.

"But I'm sure he's a really good guy," Cut to the Mandarin, speaking in an earnest, subtly mocking tone, blinking and nodding emphatically. "I'm going to shoot him in the head, live on your television,
in thirty seconds."

Thomas Richards cried out, at the words, but his pleas went unheard to the man sitting behind him. The Mandarin gestured to the phone on frame right. "The number for this telephone is in your cell phone. Exciting, isn't it, imagining how it got there?"

"That's not possible, is it?" Peter whispered to me, as if the Mandarin might be listening. We were behind the couch, Harley sitting in front of us, Tony Stark off to the side, biting his fist. I couldn't tell if he was angry or scared. "Can he really do that?"

I could only shrug helplessly. If the Mandarin could hijack the networks of the entire Eastern Seaboard, who knew what else he could do.

"America," The Mandarin continued to preach. "If your president calls me in the next half-minute, Tom lives. Go."

The four of us watched the screen. The Mandarin sat there patiently on this throne, staring into camera as serenely as a man watching the ocean. Like there wasn't even an audience. Like he was afraid of nothing. His pistol remained trained on Thomas Richards, hand steady and unwavering.

Five seconds passed. I knew the US Government didn't negotiate with terrorists, but surely, they'd do something here.

Ten seconds.

My fists curled into the couch's upholstery. Call, dammit.

Fifteen.

The antique phone by the Mandarin started to ring. The Mandarin blinked in recognition. But he did not reach for it.

The phone rang.

And rang.

And rang.

Crack!

The Mandarin pulled the trigger. He didn't even glance down.

"There's just one lesson left, President Ellis. So, run away, hide, kiss your children good-bye, because nothing, not your army, not your red-white-and-blue attack dog can save you!" The Mandarin snarled, shaking his head in disgust. He took a deep breath through his nose, looked into the camera one last time.

"I'll see you soon."

The screen fizzled out to rainbow bars and white noise. The four of us just stood there in silence, watching with wide, unblinking eyes. Didn't even look at each other. Didn't have to. We all understood what had just happened. It didn't occur to me until later that Harley just witnessed a murder on live television and none of us thought to get him out of the room first.

Then I looked at Stark and realized he was shaking.
"Mhmm, that's it," he seemed to be talking to himself, muttering under his breath and nodding his head sharply, before briskly walking over to shut off the TV and walk straight out the door. "Harley, keys!"

"W-what?" Harley seemed dazed in his seat, and only belatedly pulled his eyes away from the black screen. He didn't rise or move to do what Tony said, even as he left.

Luckily, Peter was on the ball. Thwip! Snatched the keys off the wall hook ten feet away, before jogging after Stark, back out into the night. I went after the both of them, feeling internally numb and outwardly surprised. What was Stark doing?

He headed straight for the car parked on the curb. Turning around, Tony raised his hands and in response Peter threw the keys, shouting, "Where are you going, Mr. Stark?"

"To deal with that glorified son of a bitch, that's what," Tony said, catching the keys and panting a little, voice pitched oddly high. God, maybe he was scared. "Besides, I can't stay here, it's not safe. The Mandarin probably already knows what happened. Can't put you guys at risk. I'll call, give you the 411 later when my suit's charging. Parker, you already know what to do, right?"

"Yeah, recheck the wiring, test the outputs, replace any fried circuits," Peter nodded along, glancing at me in worry. When Tony got into the old sedan, he added, "Wait, you can't just go by yourself! You don't even have a gun!"

"Don't need one!" Stark called back, before slamming the door. As the engine started, we drew to his window, and he rolled it down. "Trust me, better off on my own. Underage bodyguards, also not legal. Besides, I'm trusting you three with my suit, so don't mess it up. Especially you, Beanstalk. Keep those grubby hands away from my tech."

"Hey!" I crossed my arms, miffed.

Harley appeared next to us, dismay written across his face. "Y-you're just going to leave? Just like that?"

"Uh," Tony Stark adjusted his seat, then the rearview mirror. He glanced at us. "Ya."

Harley's eyebrows rose, voice growing tiny. His shoulders hunched up and he wrapped his arms around himself. "You're not coming back?"

"If all goes well, won't have to."

"B-but I thought we had a connection…"

"We are not having replay of your daddy issues, kid, sorry."

I threw Stark an annoyed look. It didn't occur to me that Harley might be playing it up, being melodramatic or goofy, after the scene we just witnessed on TV. Either way, Stark was being kind of an asshole, and not giving us a lot of answers. "So, what are you going to do? Fight the Mandarin in your poncho and a stolen '92 Camry?"

"Not just that." Tony Stark gave us a rare, somewhat crazed grin. "I think it's about time someone gave him a great big welcome to America, home of the good ol' red, white, and booze! Yeehaw!"

And with that, tore off with a roaring engine and the squeal of rubber.

"He's gonna die, isn't he," Harley said, sounding completely dead inside.
"...It's okay," Peter replied dimly, as we watched the rear lights of the Camry disappearing around the corner. "Mr. Stark's a responsible adult. He's done this before, right?"

"Yeah." I wrinkled my nose and nodded with more confidence than I actually had. "I'm sure he'll be fine."

---

Major shout-out to my friend Emily, who made an awesome fan trailer for this fic, which you can find here: [youtube]

I just wanted to say thank you, it's an amazing gift and i love it so much hnnnn

(casually not thinking of a new character for a Ryan Gosling face claim lmao)
Chapter Fifty-Seven

Chapter Summary

The Hell Song // Sum 41
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7pE8ReA5cn4

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fifty-Seven

✮

There was a package waiting in front of Harley's doorstep that next morning.

Normally, this wouldn't be any cause for alarm, except for the fact that Harley woke me up by dropping the ten-pound box on my lap, announcing, "It's for you!"

Still wheezing from impact, and rudely jerked from what was a very pleasant dream, I squinted blearily up at Harley, haloed in golden morning light. My brain was still catching up to the situation, and I couldn't make sense of the box in front of me. It was huge, square-shaped, like a giant pizza box. "...Is it Christmas already?"

"No," Harley shrugged. "But it's got your name on it, so I guess Santa came early. Didn't get me anything, though. Jerk."

Pulling myself up on the couch, I rubbed my eyes and took a better look. At first, I thought Harley was joking. Why would a package with my name be delivered to some kid's house in Tennessee?

But indeed, Harley was telling the truth. There, on the paper taped to the cardboard, was a handwritten note. My eyes squinted, and I disappointed myself in how long it took me to read the familiar letters. Amelia E. Fletcher, NYC. No return addresses.

"Well?" Harley prompted, flopping down at the end of the couch and looking at me expectantly. "Aren't you going to open it?"

I didn't want to — at least not in front of Harley. I had a bad feeling about this. "Were you up all night?"

"Yeah, I've been eating candy," Harley replied with a shrug. He sat back down on the workbench and grabbed a fistful of smarties from a bowl nearby. Shoving them into his mouth, he continued, "Just like Iron Man told me to. Pete tried to keep up but..."

We looked over. Peter was passed out, using Iron Man's head for a pillow on the desk next to Harley. The boy made a face. "He couldn't cut it."
After a twelve-hour road trip and fighting Extremis soldiers? I didn't blame him. "What about Stark?"

"Mr. Stark has arrived in Miami three hours and twenty-seven minutes ago." JARVIS' voice rating out from the armor lying on the table between us, making me jump. "He maintains check-ins. I believe he is preparing to raid the Mandarin's zucchini."

"We got him working again," Harley explained with a grin. "Took three bowls of skittles but we did it! Still got to work out a few kinks, he keeps saying the wrong word at the end of his sentences. Rebooting his language drive didn't work, gonna try the voice next…"

"Good, good," I replied absently — already working at the packages tape with my fingernails. I shouldn't have trimmed them the other day. "Definitely check that. Maybe Peter could help…"

"Mnn, not today, Aunt May," Peter mumbled, shrinking away when Harley poked him.

"He's been like that all night," Harley complained to me.

"Leave him alone, he's been through a lot," I shot back, still working on the tape. Damn, did they double-wrap this… "We've been moving around non-stop for the past two days. He can sleep."

"...S'fine." On the desk, Peter shifted and yawn, lifting his head to squint in the morning light. He was still in the same clothes from two days ago. "I-I can still help, ah. Yeah. I'm awake. I figure out why the suit wasn't charging, so it should be ready to go in... uh," he squinted at his watch. "Five hours? Yeah. It should at least be able to fly remotely to his location, but it's gonna be longer for us to figure out how to actually make it fly again…"

"I'm sure you'll figure it out."

Harley tapped his chin in thought. "I wonder how Iron Man is gonna fight the Mandarin without his suit. We're almost done, but what if it's not ready —"

I didn't hear the rest of it because I'd just lifted the flaps of the box, having finally gotten rid of the tape — only to catch a glimpse of what was inside and immediately close the box again. Heart skipping a beat, my eyes flew up, wide, making sure no one else saw it and reminding myself to stay calm, normal, not give anything away. Harley and Peter were on the other side of the work table, and not close enough to see.

"...And so that's why my sister isn't allowed in here anymore," Harley finished the anecdote I completely missed with a self-satisfied smirk.

I blinked, confused, trying to think past the panicked broken record in my head: shishishishit —

"So, what's in the box?" Harley piped up.

I froze, fingers tightening over the flaps of the box. What the hell should I say? I couldn't just show Harley a Vibranium shield — the kid wasn't an idiot, he'd figure out pretty quick it was the real thing. And that wasn't even talking about Peter…

"Nothing," I finally said with a tight smile, eyes fix on Peter, who returned the look with confusion. "Hey, you wanna come with me and get some breakfast? I'm starving."

"Uh, sure," Peter said, frowning.

"I'll come, too!" Harley piped up with a grin.
"No!" I said, too fast. Harley froze — he'd hopped off the stool almost immediately, before Peter could even rise to his feet. Both boys now stared at me with equal looks of bafflement, and I flushed. "No. S-sorry. I just meant, Harley, someone has to stay and receive any messages from Tony. It… should be you."

"Oh. Okay."

I jumped up from the couch, box in arms, reminding myself to stay calm. Once I told Peter, it would be okay. It was going to be fine. Nothing was wrong. Nothing was wrong.

Stepping into the front yard, my movements were stiff and stilted as I set the box on a nearby lawn table covered in snow. Harley's backyard was fairly sparse and ill-taken care off. An old gray picket fence that went over my head blocked the neighbor's view; an old tractor tire lied forsaken in one corner, reclaimed by overgrown weeds, while on the porch was an ancient rusted grill that looked like some forgotten remnant of old memories. Things I hadn't noticed the other night, sitting out here in the dark.

It was kind of sad, actually, but my mind was too busy scrambling to think about it. What with the constant looking over my shoulder, Peter undoubtedly sensed my paranoia. "...Um, Mia? Are you okay?"

I pressed my lips together, unable to speak, but unsure whether to nod or shake my head. I hadn't decided how I felt about this beyond WTF.

Wiping clammy hands on my jeans, knowing I was absolutely screwed, I just jerked my chin at the box. "Just...take a look."

Peter threw me one last baffled expression before opening the flaps and peering in. "What could possibly — holy mackerel!"

He leapt back, gaping, arms flying up in shock. Peter turned back to me, pointing a shaking finger at the box, the metal glinting inside. "W-what — how did you — is that — is that an actual —?"

I nodded.

"A real — Vibranium and — it can deflect bullets a-and —"

"Yep."

"Just like Captain —"

"Uh-huh."

"Ha — who — what —?" Peter's words devolved into fragments, nervous laughter. He ran a hand through his hair, spun around in place before stopping at me again. "Is it — how did you — is it yours?"

My gaze shifted to the red star gleaming in the morning light. I honestly never thought I was going to see it again. "Well, it's here, so I guess so. For now, at least."

"But who —?"

"SHIELD." I replied, frowning slightly, still focused on the hunk of metal before me. I'd been thinking about that particular question ever since I opened the box. How did they know? Not just that I might need it, but even where to find me. I wasn't positively sure where I was at any given
moment. How in the goddamn… "They must know what we're doing. Maybe they think we'll actually get involved. Physically."

"Like last night?"

"Worse."

His face paled. "Oh. Yeah, I guess…that makes sense. Do you — I mean, have you used it before?"

"SHIELD loaned it out when we went back to the Crucible."

"And you just conveniently forgot about that part when you explained it to me the other week." Peter said, fixing me with a skeptical look.

I didn't look at him. We both knew the truth; I'd intentionally left it out, and for good reason. There was only supposed to be one shield. Vibranium was rare as it was. And I didn't want to stick the idea in Peter's head that I was some sort of hero in the same vein of Captain America. Or any hero at all, really. I was what I had to be at that particular moment in time.

I also knew what it meant to be seeing this again, and not just that SHIELD was doing me a solid; it meant that Coulson knew I broke the deal. Now I was under constant surveillance. Maybe I was the whole time. But now, if I fucked up big time, they'd come for me. And I won't be going home again.

Peter, meanwhile, seemed beside himself with excitement. He lifted the shield out of the box, looking like a kid at Christmas, before he paused, stared inside for a long moment. Then he turned back to me with the most wicked grin. "You also left out the part about the supersuit."

"What?" I yelped, rushing over. I had no idea there was anything beneath the shield — the shock of seeing it alone prevented further curiosity.

But right there, folded neatly in the bottom of the box, was the blue jacket, white star mocking me with its overt patriotism. The brass buttons and sturdy quilted fabric, looking ridiculously hokey to me now, two months out and a newfound self-awareness later. The uniform, black boots tucked in with the jodhpurs and gloves, sitting there like it was just waiting to reappear in my life and make me a liar.

And Peter was living. "You did not wear that."

"I did." I glared at the star. You're dead to me, Coulson.

"Unironically?"

"Unironically." I grit my teeth.

"Huh. Well, I guess someone thinks you're Captain America's kid, after all." Peter laughed — only for that shit-eating grin to promptly drop off his face when my glare landed on him. He faltered. "Ah — oh. Too soon?"

I just rolled my eyes and grabbed the shield, stuffing it back into the box and closing it again. "Doesn't matter. I'll have to figure out a way to send this back, somehow…"

"What?" Peter's face dropped, and when I turned with the box in my arms, he stepped in my way, holding a hand out. "You mean you're not going to put it on?"

"What? No!"
"Why not?"

"Why not?" I repeated, scathing. "Peter, we're in the middle of freakin' Tennessee, on Christmas Eve, I'm not dressing up like some sparkly patriotic back-up dancer."

"You're just saying that because you don't want me to see what you look like wearing it."

Fed up, and unable to come up with a comeback, I just scoffed and skirted around him, going back into the garage. Peter was hot on my heels, even opened the door for me, which was nice of him.

He used it as another opportunity to change my mind. "Oh, come on! You got to see me in my pajama suit! It can't be worse than that."

I passed him on the way inside, scowling, but plagued with uncertainty. The suit certainly was better made than Peter's homespun suit, but that didn't mean I wouldn't look any less ridiculous. "No."

"Back already?" Harley's voice called when we entered. He looked disappointed, empty bowl of skittles in his hands. "Wait, where's breakfast?"

"What, you don't have food in the house?" I demanded, short of patience. "Don't you have a sister, too? Maybe you should go make sure she's okay before she gets hungry and starts looking for you."

Harley scowled at me, and looked ready to argue before he set his bowl down and hopped off his stool. "Ugh, fine."

Harley was just about to pass us on the way out the door when JARVIS piped up: "Uh, sirs and ma'am, we may have a problem."

All three of us turned to face the suit. "What is it?"

"Well, if my assumptions are correct, and my communication functions have not been compromised," JARVIS explained. "Then I believe I have lost contact with Tony Stark. He has not made contact since his arrival in Miami. I fear something may be wrong."

We stood there, exchanging looks of alarm. Peter met my eyes and, in a tone grim as a heart attack, said, "Put on the suit."

"Right, yeah," I jolted, as if shocked, and stumbled back, looking down at the box. Guess I didn't have a choice now. "And you find us a way to get to Miami!"

In five minutes, I was back; no time to waste when Tony Stark was having his ass handed to him somewhere. It was the fastest I'd ever gotten dressed, which was saying something because the uniform wasn't exactly simple to put on. All those damn straps — the jacket and harness were also a little tight around my torso. I'd gained weight since returning home.

Harley and Peter were arguing when I walked into the garage again, facing each other on either end of the work table and nearly shouting directly into each other's faces. Clearly, they were making a lot of headway with finding that route to Miami.

"Are you seriously just going to go over there by yourself —"

"Uh, yeah? I mean, we got here on our own, didn't we? Florida's not that crazy, once we have a car —"

"Can you even drive?"
"Well, no, not exactly —"

"Then take the bus! And take me with you!"

"No way! The bus is too slow with too many stops. And besides, you're only kid!"

"And you're just a teenager!"

"Yeah, but that's different —"

"Three years isn't that different —"

"— It is when people are shooting at you —"

"Shooting at me? With real bullets?"

"No, with potatoes. Of course, with real bullets!"

"Guys!" I shouted, raising my voice to be heard over the argument. Both of them stopped mid-sentence to stare at me.

"Whoa!" Harley launched straight up, nearly falling off his seat, before righting himself against the table. "Where the hell did you get that? Was that in the box?!"

Peter burst out into a big grin, positively vibrating where he stood. "Mia! You look — with that shield and the, the helmet and — That's so cool!"

"Uh, thanks," I stood there awkwardly, shield in hand, before I started to feel self-conscious and hooked it on my back. "Please tell me you guys figured something out, because I'm not getting on a bus like this."

"Well, er," Peter rubbed the back of his head, glancing at Harley before back at me. He shrugged, but it was more like a wince. "We're not sure what else to do. It's not like we can drive, and I'm not sure if we should risk learning now."

"I mean, why not?" I asked, tilting my head. Driving didn't sound so bad, especially not with the stakes at hand. "We have to head out as soon as possible. If driving illegally is the fastest way to get to Miami, then that's what we should do."

"Great plan! But you guys don't have a car." Harley said, throwing out his hands. He flopped back down in his seat, defeated. "I'd let you use my mom's car if, ya know, she wasn't already using it. And it'd get me grounded for, like, eternity."

Peter and I exchanged a silent look. We were going to be in about the same deep shit as Harley would be when we got back to Aunt May.

Hesitantly, Peter suggested, "Maybe we can steal one?"

I made a face. Driving illegally was one thing, I wasn't sure how far we'd get with grand theft auto on our heads. It wasn't the worst thing I'd ever done, but not really a crime we could afford to commit right now. I wasn't sure we could get away with it.

"Perhaps I can offer a calendar." JARVIS spoke up politely, the lights in Iron Man's mask flickering. "I have taken the liberty to call upon one of Mr. Stark's automated vehicles from his personal collection in upstate New York. They are what survived after the destruction of his Malibu home. Seeing that Mr. Stark already contacted Colonel Rhodes, it was my understanding Mr. Stark
could use all the help he could get, even from as unlikely a place as you two. Apologies, Mr. Keener."

"Aw, man!"

"Wait, wait," I stepped forward, waving a hand in confusion. "Are you saying you're gonna taxi us over to Miami? In one of Stark's cars? How?"

"Mr. Stark has equipped a prototype automated driving system in most of his personal vehicles," JARVIS chirped matter-of-factly. "In case of an emergency or if he is too drunk to drive home and Mr. Hogan is unavailable. SHIELD has raised interest in this technology, thus he has been fine tuning the software, for commercial and military use."

"Well," Peter said, raising his eyebrows and giving me a look, pleasantly surprised. "I guess that works out then. So how long do we have to wait until it gets here?"

"Three minutes."

"What?" The three of us blurted, caught off guard. I

"Damn, can his cars fly now, too?" I demanded; I'd expecting a longer wait, considering where the car was coming from. How many off-site locations did Stark even have?

"Hardly, although I'm sure Mr. Stark is considering the capability as well. Mr. Stark first ordered the car as a rescue, back when he first crash landed in Tennessee. Unfortunately, I just run out of power and had been unable to run the order until last night when Mr. Parker and Keener brought me back online. It appears Mr. Stark forgot and borrowed a civilian vehicle. Quite serendipitous, if I do say so myself."

"So, you'll be driving us, then?" I asked, just as I heard tires screeching outside. Together, the three of us piled out the door to witness a silver Audi R8 convertible pulled into Harley's driveway.

It flashed its headlights once at us, before the doors popped open. There was no one in the driver's seat.

"You think JARVIS could've chosen something a little less flashy?" I muttered under my breath as we approached the vehicle. I had no idea the engine was still on; it was almost silent, a gentle hum that didn't even disturb the air.

"My apologies, I know Mr. Stark has a certain taste. This was the least ostentatious model I could find." JARVIS' voice emanated from the speakers within the R8's cabin. It was a two-seater — Harley couldn't come even if we wanted him to.

"Either way, I don't think the police are gonna buy some teenager is allowed to drive this car if they stop us on the road." I replied, peering into the cabin. Damn, were those leather seats? The car was so low to the ground I nearly had to stoop to a crouch. At least the convertible hood was on, otherwise it was gonna be a cold drive. "I call drivers."

"What?" Peter yelped, his head poking in on the other side of the car. "Why do you get to drive?"

"I'm not driving, dummy, JARVIS is."

"Yeah, but it'll look like you're driving."

"So? I look older anyways. If a cop sees you behind the wheel, he'll know right away you're
"underage."

"Oh, come on! I don't look that young, do I?"

"I agree with Miss Fletcher," JARVIS said mildly. "She should be in the driver's seat."

"Ha." I smiled at Peter, extremely smug as I slid into the front seat. My knees hit the steering wheel, and I had to adjust the chair until it slid back far enough for my legs. Guess Mr. Stark was shorter than me.

"No fair," Peter grumbled, sullen as he flopped into shotgun, arms crossed.

"I'll try to stay in contact with you guys with JARVIS on this end." Harley said, although he seemed mildly distracted, checking out the Audi's rims. "This is even cooler than your fake shield!"

"Do we tell him?" Peter whispered, leaning in.

I leaned back and just shook my head, pursing my lips. No use getting the kid too excited now when we were leaving. I was just glad I made it this far without Harley ever learning I couldn’t read. The little squirt would never let me live it down. I quickly shoved the shield into the narrow space behind the seats, since it was too wide to sit with comfortably on my back. Also, best that a cop didn't see it, on the off-chance (make that highly likely) we were pulled over.

"We will be monitoring news feeds and radio channels for any news of Mr. Stark or Ten Rings activities." JARVIS replied as Peter started to fiddle with the Bluetooth music controls. "Estimated travel time is eight hours and forty-five minutes."

Eight hours? I worded it silently to myself, frowning. That didn't sound right. My last calculation said over twelve…

"So, I guess, have a safe trip, then?" Harley stood up, giving us an uncertain look through the windshield. He tapped the glass. "I'm not sure if this tinted stuff is legal."

"Don't worry about it," I said, even as I was starting to worry about it. Peter and I shut the doors and settled back in our seats, waving to Harley as the Audi slowly kicked into gear and gently reversed. Damn, the seats were heated, too.

We left the driveway safely enough, waving goodbye to Harley in the window before the car started heading out on a lonely country road. I was busy running my hands through my hair, even though it'd inevitably get messed up by the helmet (I wasn't sure if I was ready to run around in that in Miami, Florida, but I supposed if it was dangerous enough, I wouldn't have much of a choice.

We passed an orange diamond sign, and Peter slowly turned to look at me, a shit-eating grin on his face. "Road work ahead? Well, I sure hope it does!"

I was just about to smack him when JARVIS interrupted me.

"I hope so as well, Mr. Parker," the AI said as the car suddenly started to pick up speed. It was a 45 mile-hour zone — why were we suddenly going sixty?

"I should give you two a fair warning before we begin our journey." JARVIS said lightly as I grabbed the wheel in my alarm "Due to the urgency of the situation, I will not be obeying any stop signs or traffic lights for the duration of the trip."

"...Wait, what?" Peter and I looked at each other, eyes going wide.
"For your safety, its best if you buckle up."

We barely had time to scramble for them before JARVIS hit the gas and tore off down the street. The force of acceleration slammed us back, and I actually felt breathless for a moment as the view outside became a blur of white, blue, and grey.

"Omigod, we're gonna die, we're gonna die," Peter whimpered under his breath as JARVIS hit the highway and soared to almost a hundred miles an hour.

I could count the number of times I was scared while in a vehicle, and most of them ended with me making fun of Mom, or Aunt May, or some other well-meaning adult trying to drive in awful New York traffic. I wasn't really afraid, not really. Those were adults I trusted wholeheartedly, even if they did make mistakes sometimes.

This? JARVIS driving? This put the fear of God in me.

"I'm never going to make fun of Aunt May's driving ever again," I gasped as we skirted around two eighteen-wheelers by going on the right shoulder, hitting the rumble strip before JARVIS slammed the Audi back into the passing lane. As if the country roads were bad enough — the highway was a million times worse. I had a white-knuckle grip on the overhead handle; I was partially terrified of breaking it off on accident and be left with nothing to hold onto.

In front of me, the wheel spun back and forth as JARVIS maneuvered the quickest route through three lane noon traffic. There was no point in grabbing it — aside from the radio and heating, we had no control over the actual function of the car. The wheel, pedals, doors, even the blinkers all operated on their own, like the damn car was haunted. I couldn't even turn on the radio for fear of letting go and achieving imminent death.

"JARVIS?" Peter asked, voice squeaking a little. "Who designed your driving software?"

"Mr. Stark has created the entirety of this protocol on his own time," JARVIS replied, cool as a cucumber as he dodged around a minivan going fifty miles slower than us. "He modeled it after his own unique driving ability, to make for a more authentic experience."

"Oh, it's authentic, alright," I mumbled, my stomach shoved up somewhere near my throat. "I think I'm gonna be sick."

"I would kindly ask you not to do that while inside the vehicle; Mr. Stark is very fond of the upholstery. If you feel the urge to vomit, please do so out the window."

I glared at the radio, as if I could somehow mentally communicate with JARVIS how much I truly cared for Tony Stark's beloved leather seats. "Never mind. I can hold it."

For such a helpful forewarning, JARVIS failed to mention he would also ignore any and all speed limits, maxing out at 70 miles an hour at any given moment; along the way, catching the attention of no less than seven police cars, and through the use of reckless driving and jamming their radio systems did we manage to escape each time — resulting in a grueling eight hour long heart attack from Rose Hill, Tennessee to Miami, Florida.

I guess the only positive side to this is that we shaved about three to four hours off our trip thanks to JARVIS' pragmatic driving. Guess his estimate was correct after all.

Peter and I did experience a relatively peaceful five minutes of uneventful high-speed racing on I-75, where we had a nice heart to heart.
"So why didn't you want to put on the suit?" his question broke my concentration on the road. Up until now, we hadn't spoken besides various sounds of fears and complaints of JARVIS' driving.

I shrugged half-heartedly, studying the brand symbol on the wheel. "Dunno. Just didn't feel right, I guess."

The look Peter gave me said he wasn't buying that wishy-washy bullshit. When he didn't drop it, I sighed. No point in holding out on him. "SHIELD gave me an ultimatum when I first left. Use my powers, do anything crazy and I get put on their watchlist. I promised them I'd stay out of trouble, so they'd stay out of my life. I don't have to tell you how well that worked out."

"So," Peter raised his chin, brow furrowing. "You putting on that suit means you're breaking that promise. Does that mean SHIELD is just gonna come barging into your life — our lives — at any moment now?"

I gave another shrug. I had no idea what Coulson had meant and to be honest, I had been too afraid to ask. I didn't know what SHIELD did to people like me. I wasn't supposed to exist. "It means I'm no longer a private citizen. They'll be monitoring me constantly."

"If they haven't already," Peter added, and his shrewdness made me smile a little. "But isn't that entrapment? Giving you the suit and shield, knowing it'll protect you."

I hadn't thought of it that way. "Oh. I don't know. Maybe they thought they were doing me a favor."

That would probably be Skye or Fitz' motive, best I could figure. They didn't seem like the type to pull some underhanded move like that, forcing me to make an impossible decision. Coulson? He seemed like a guy with good intentions, but I didn't put him above using sly tactics to get what he wanted. The whole 'Put-Upon Soccer Dad' routine was deceptive, to say the least.

Did he really want me under SHIELD's thumb?

"To be honest," I continued, fiddling with a button on my coat. "I was prepared for this. I knew this would probably happen as soon as we left New York. Before that, even. It seemed worth the risk."

"So that's not the reason you didn't want to wear the suit?" Peter was starting to look confused. "I mean, if it were me, I'd be psyched to be like Captain America."

I glanced at him, then away again. I ran my hand over the white star sewn into the jacket. "But I'm not like Captain America. I never fought for my country. I was just fighting to survive."

"You went back for those twins, though," Peter pointed out. "That wasn't survival. You didn't have to do that."

"Yes, I did," I replied almost immediately, then bit back my next words. Peter was right. Saving the twins had been my own choice — I had risked everything for them. Twice. "Maybe it wasn't about survival, then. It was about...I don't know. They were my friends. And they didn't deserve to be locked up. They deserved to be free. To be who they wanted to be. We had to fight back."

"So, truth and independence?" Peter tilted his head at that, one side of his mouth quirking up. "With a side order of freedom? I don't know, Mia, that sounds pretty American to me."

I frowned to myself. Was he right? Was it more than just love of country? Was it just belief in a certain ideal? Because I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, that those things — freedom, independence, truth — were important to me. I was never going to belong to anyone. No one was ever going to control me again. SHIELD could play its tricks if it wanted, but I wasn't beholden to
them. Whatever I did, whatever happened to me, it would be because of the choices I made, not anyone else's.

And that wasn't going to happen if I let Killian win.

"Please tell me you guys aren't gonna start crying," Harley's voice echoed from the speakers, sounding distinctly disgusted. "God, you guys are killing me here."

I kicked the radio, wishing I could shut off the receiver. I'd forgotten Harley could hear us. "Were you listening this entire time, you little heathen?"

"Yeah, and I was almost bored to tears." Harley replied. "You guys get to drive in Mr. Stark's super cool car and all you can talk about is dumb responsibility stuff. Like, come on. Live a little."

"Live a little," Peter repeated, laughing under his breath. "Live a little before we get ourselves killed, you mean."

"Exactly!"

Peter and I looked at each other and just shook our heads. Harley just didn't get it.

By the time we finally reached Miami, I had made a promise to myself that whenever I got a driver's license, I would never break a single law, ever. The sheer terror of discovering what a hundred miles an hour really feels like was enough to officially put me off driving for the foreseeable future.

On the way here, I had marveled at the palm trees and flamingos and other tropical wild life I'd seen on the way here. The houses in Florida were noticeably wide; single floor structures with open garages and flat roofs. Not unlike apartment buildings, maybe, but single homes in New York had predominantly peaked roofs. Not to mention, Florida was just flat in general. The horizon went out as far as the eye could see, not a single mountain or hill in sight. The biggest peak we ever went over were the highway bridges over swamps. I was pretty sure I actually saw an alligator lounging on a sidewalk at one point.

"We have arrived at our destination."

I nearly tumbled to the ground in my scramble to leave the car as soon as possible. My hands scraped against the tarmac and I almost wanted to kiss the ground before remembering myself. *Get a hold of yourself, Fletcher.*

Swinging back up to my feet, I faced the mansion before us — or rather, the vine-covered wall blocking view of the house and protecting it from anything on the street.

Downside: I had no idea what was on the other side of that wall.

Upside: I spotted no cameras in this particular corner of the compound.

Downside: It was effing hot out. Winter meant *nothing* in Florida.

"Here, Mia," I was already unbuttoning my jacket when Peter came up to my side, handing me the shield; I had forgotten it in the back of the car. He gazed at the wall, adjusting his coat awkwardly. "Is it just me, or is it really quiet?"

"Yeah," I muttered, taking the shield with a grateful nod and keeping it on my arm. I had a feeling I would need it soon. I glanced up at the darkening sky, the stars beginning to twinkle in the early night. "I don't see any lights on, and the sun's setting. Something must be up."
At least that would make the air cooler, but I was honestly itching to get inside, if only for the air conditioning. Putting on my helmet, I glanced at Peter. "Ready?"

"As I'll ever be," Peter said with a shrug, pulling on his mask. His suit looked only slightly more intimidating with the jacket over it, although it was fair to say both of us looked pretty uncomfortable standing there in the middle of a Miami street. Luckily it was a rich neighborhood, otherwise we'd be running into a lot more pedestrians.

"Fantastic," I said, and together we climbed over the wall and dropped to the other side.

Our feet barely made a sound as we landed on soft black dirt behind some shrubbery. Well, thank God the Mandarin liked nice gardens and raked every once in a while. Peering through the bushes, I saw no patrolling guards on the patio about twenty feet away. Large willow trees with their thick, wilting branches added to the height of the surrounding wall, and flower bushes filled the area, an inground swimming pool to our right, a patio to the left. The mansion seemed to span what was directly in front of us, and I had no idea how large it actually was from this angle. I couldn't see the rest of it from here. There was a fountain bubbling quietly. The sky was getting dark fast — but the mansion was dark before us. It looked fancy, suitable for a rich terrorist in hiding, but still. Too quiet. Too empty.

"Okay, this is definitely not right," Peter said as we decided to risk it and stepped out onto the lawn. There was literally no one there. I didn't have a night-night gun, but I didn't need it, either — none of the cameras I saw seemed to be on.

"I know, but be careful," I replied quietly, raising my hand to keep him behind me as we stepped onto the patio. Light as could be, as if any moment a tile beneath me would sink and reveal a trap. "It could be a set-up."

"You think anyone's expecting us?"

I paused, glanced at Peter. "I don't know. We made a pretty big deal in Tennessee, didn't we?"

"Yeah, but they're more worried about Iron Man, not two...two nobodies like us. I don't think anyone even knows who Spider-Man is outside of the city."

"True," I frowned, then continued forward. There was something in the fountain as I looked closer. I didn't notice it at first because it was dark and hard to see in the lengthening shadows but — "Oh, shit."

Peter jumped back with a tiny gasp. "Oh my god, is he dead?"

What must have been a former guard was collapsed face forward into the fountain, head underwater. It was highly doubtful he was still alive, but I poked him with my shield just to make sure. "Oh yeah. Definitely dead."

I began to edge around him, and my boot crunched on something. I looked down, surprised to see not glass, but broken ornaments scattered across the stonework. What the hell? "I'm gonna take a wild guess and say that Stark was here before us."

"Yeah," Peter wove around another body with heavy burns on his face, dropping to a crouch as we approached the nearest doorway. He pressed his face to the glass, squinting. "I don't see anyone inside. You think he already cleared the place?"

"If he had, why did he go silent?" I asked. We still hadn't gotten any word from JARVIS on any reconnect with Stark. He could still be in trouble. I reached up and grabbed the knob, turning it
slowly and pulling it out, trying to make as little noise as possible. Movements slow and focused, heart racing in my ears. I felt myself fall back into that familiar stance, of bowed head and hunched shoulders, eyes scanning every inch of the darkness, ready for any incoming threat.

I clenched and unclenched my hands. I was ready for a fight.

Maybe too ready.

As before, the interior was as empty as the garden. Only more lavishly furnished, and in bad taste, I might add. A purple shag rug. A signed poster of the Kardashians. Framed pictures of famous stage actors from cross history, light up signs along the wall, a massive TV in the living room and an egregious tiger carpet in the foyer. A pool table with balls still in play, but no one around to finish it. Beer bottles and cans everywhere. Peter kept kicking into them, and apologizing each time.

There was also the smell. I had no idea what to call it, except unappealing and somewhat disconcerting. It's what I imagined a frat house to smell like. Beer, dude sweat and dirty laundry. Maybe someone should open a window.

"You know, this is just me," Peter whispered as we snuck through the living room or whatever it was. "But I think this guy has a lot of, er, western pop culture stuff for someone who really hates America."

I was about to make a dumb joke before I realized Peter had a point, and looked around again. There was a lot of useless extravagant stuff here, the kind you find in the rich homes of people who had no idea what to do with their money and just liked buying the first thing they saw. There was no style, no class, just a random hodgepodge of golden utensils and furry chairs. Would the Mandarin, who despised America and all that it stood for, really admire this shit?

"He's also a total slob," I muttered, kicking away a dirty sock just lying there on the floor. "I guess is it really that surprising the Mandarin's a total hypocrite?"

"Just another greedy despot in the world?" Peter snorted, throwing me a wry look. "Yeah, I guess it's not that weird."

Our stupid smiles faded, however, when we stepped into the next room.

The throne. The phone. The cave. The piles of weapons and burned helmets. The setting for every one of the Mandarin's terrifying videos on TV. The site of murder and chaos.

The stage.

I blinked, flicking on a light and taking it all in. "It's.... it's fake."

Peter rose to his feet, shoulders dropping in shock. There was a gun nearby, and with a quick snap of his wrist he grabbed with a sling of web. "And so are the guns — its loaded with blanks!"

"This doesn't make any sense," I muttered, going right up to the throne, the roughened floor, looking up at the stage lights overhead. The lines of cords, the camera set up, a computer editing room next door, a freaking make-up booth with the iconic sunglasses and green robes. All there. All fake. "They made it look like he was filming from some cave in the Middle East. This entire time, it was all done here?"

"All for show," Peter mused to himself, walking around, looking up at the ceiling and then down at the ground. He kicked the cave wall. It came away with a loud crunch. "Painted Styrofoam. I can't believe it. He had us all fooled."
That's when two double doors, painted with ornate Chinese dragons, suddenly flew open. The both of us jumped back as a small man burst out, his hands up together holding a gun. The Mandarin. Eyes wild, hair awry, bathrobe fluttering — "Ay! Intruders! Hands up or I'll shoot!"

I almost complied on instinct before I stopped, squinted. There was nothing in the Mandarin's hands.

I didn't even reach for my shield. I could only stare in dumb shock. "Are...are you making a gun with your fingers?"

His eyes, wide as full goddamn moon, flicked to me, and he aimed his finger-gun at my chest. "No talking! I'll only say it once! Wait, what are you wearing? Is that Captain America's shield?"

That's when I noted the British accent. Far from the deep baritone from the clips, this man no longer had complimentary lighting and friendly cameras to make him look larger than life to the terrified masses. Peter, who seemed fast on the take, just raised a hand and with a flick, caught the Mandarin's fists in a mask of web, effectively locking them together.

"Wot the —" The Mandarin recoiled in shock, and was too busy staring at his hands to see me following up, grabbing the front of his greasy shirt and dragging him over to the fake throne and tossing him down. "Oi! Take it easy there, girlie, this is five million dollars of fine stage acting you're messing with!"

"So, you are a fake," I said, stepping back and crossing my arms. "Who are you? Where's the real Mandarin?"

"Real Mandarin?" the man blinked up innocently, resting his webbed-up hands primly in his lap. "Well, I don't have a clue of what you're talking about."

I exchanged a look with Peter as he came up next to me. We had the guy effectively cornered. I was still reeling a little from the revelation that all this was a farce, and trying to equate it with all the goddamn danger I've been in for the past two years. I had known Killian was the head honcho in charge of the Extremis soldiers, allied with the Mandarin and the Ten Rings, but if this Mandarin was just a figurehead...

When the Not Mandarin refused to say anything else, I just sighed, and with a roll of my eyes, raised a half-hearted fist. The man yelped, flinching back onto his throne, and quickly blurted, "I don't know! My name's Trevor, and I am — I was a prestigious London stage actor. I was just hired to play the part! Hate the role, not the actor!"

"Are you serious?" Peter demanded, sounding about as frustrated as I felt. "Where's Tony Stark?"

"Who?" The Not Mandarin, Trevor, whatever, threw him a wide-eyed look. Then he perked up, raising one finger with his whole fist stuck together. "Oh! You must be with him! The other guy! He showed up earlier today. Before...before noon, I think, yes, but then he broke out a few hours later. I think he learned about the Christmas plot, which is a real shame, it was quite the twist — and can I say, I just love your mask, the use of welding goggles? Ingenious —"

"So Stark saw you?" I demanded, trying not to freak out by how light-hearted Trevor seemed about all of this. Just an actor? That's it? No dark, gritty background? Just some idiot they got to play a part? "Does he know?"

"Well, I suppose he does now," The Mandarin — dammit, Trevor — said with a shrug. He raised his eyebrows and added, "He figured out the whole spiel for himself, right before Savin gave him the ol' conk on the head. Sure, he was mad at me for letting the cat out of the bag, so to speak, but I think
I handled the situation pretty well, myself."

"I guess he has his proof that Killian's the one in charge, then."

"Yeah, but in charge of everything?"

"Oh, you know my employer?" Trevor asked, looking pleasantly surprised.

I glared at him, then froze when the rest of his words refiltered in my head. "W-wait, did you say Savin?"

"Why, yes! He's usually the one to look out for me. Very good fellow, although a little rough around the edges, if I do say so —"

"Shit, so Stark didn't kill him after all," I spoke over Trevor, ignoring him completely in favor for Peter, who was looking tenser by the second. "No wonder he was out for a while. Killian's still got more Extremis soldiers working for him. Who knows how many are left."

"He's probably prepping them for whatever he has planned," Peter replied, then looked to Trevor, who was starting to look neglected. "What happened? Where is everyone now?"

"Oh, they took off after your friend did! Very big news down the grapevine, some big show to happen tonight. Seems your friend and my boss are at odds! What a thing. Then there was that whole thing with Air Force One —"

"What whole thing?" Peter and I exchanged looks of alarm, leaning in to Trevor with growing intensity.

"Oh, you didn't hear? The President's plane blew up over the Cape not a few hours ago. Hell of a thing, really. Usually a tragedy but I heard Iron Man saved the crew! Well, except for the President, poor bloke got kidnapped or somethin', but everything else went fine!"

"WHAT?" Peter and I shouted at the same time. Peter turned to me, his voice rising in panic, "Why didn't JARVIS say anything? We never had to come here at all! We could've just gone to Mr. Stark right away!"

"I don't know, something must have happened," I said, shaking my head. The news had me shaken. The President? Holy shit. Looks like Killian was making good on his promise. To Trevor, I said, "You don't happen to know where Killian took the President, do you?"

"Oh, some oil rig off the coast, I think, I was only there once —"

"If I showed you map, do you think you could point to where it is?" I had no time to question Trevor's inexplicable helpfulness, and was already looking around for something to use as Peter's phone started to ring.

"Well, I don't know, he'd be pretty mad if I started just giving away all the secrets," Trevor said, somewhat haltingly. He seemed more comfortable now, and was readily gazing between the two of us. "You sound awfully young, lad. I don't think this is a situation appropriate for children such as yourselves. It's just not safe!"

"But blowing up theaters is?" I shot back, grabbing a laptop from the computer room. "You do realize who you've been working for, right? Killian's been terrorizing people for months! You've been helping him get away with it!"
"Oh, you kids and your moralizing," Trevor just scoffed. "You don't see the nuance, the context!"

"What nuance?" Peter asked coldly.

"Well, money, of course!" Trevor replied with a grin as I crouched on the stage nearby, opening up a browser on the laptop. "Oh, and drugs! Can't forget that."

I just rolled my eyes and looked up at Peter, who suddenly seemed absorbed by a window overhead. "What's wrong?"

"You don't hear that?"

"Hear what?" Trevor and I asked at the same time. I glared at him and the man shrunk away.

"Footsteps," Peter replied. A second later, "Guns."

"Shit," I said, looking over my shoulder at the doorway they came through. "How far away?"

"I don't know, they're outside."

"Oh, they must be coming back," Trevor replied gleefully, bouncing in his seat. "Tonight's show must be already set up! I can't wait for someone to let me free of this — of this — what is this stuff, anyways? It's disgusting."

"Don't worry about it," Peter said, grabbing the laptop just as I pulled up a map of Florida and showed him the screen. "Point."

"Oh, uh —" Trevor squinted, peering in and waving his finger around. I didn't have time to see where he pointed before a sound behind us caught my attention.

A loud crash. A door being broken down. "Welp, that's our cue. Time to go, Maverick."

Peter chucked the laptop away, apparently having gotten an answer and with his web-shooter opened the window above us. In a single leap he was out, and reached down to help me up as well.

Just as I rolled out onto the grass above, I heard Trevor call out from below, "Good luck, you two! Would be a real shame if you died!"

My only reply was to slam the window shut.

Getting up, I brushed some grass off my coat. Peter was already taking me by the arm and leading me to the roof. The mansion was multi-leveled, and this upper garden had steps leading up to the highest point in the compound. "It doesn't bother you he saw your face?"

"Who, Trevor?" I snorted. "No way. He's a moron."

"Okay, fair enough. New question," Peter came to a stop at the balcony edge, grasping the banister and bouncing a little — clearly itching to swing off but with no high enough building nearby to do so. "How do we get out of here? I hate suburban neighborhoods, I can't get anywhere."

"We have to get to Tony," I said, scanning the compound. From here we could see everything — the entire property within the walls was nearly five acres. A piece even stretched out to the beach beyond. "He doesn't know who the Mandarin really is. Probably heading out to save the President now."

Our eyes drew to the coast, the ocean on the horizon. It was completely dark outside now. I could hear pounding footsteps and shouting beneath us. It wouldn't take long for Killian's forces to find us,
especially if Trevor stayed as talkative as he was. We needed a way out, fast.

"Look!" Peter pointed to a spot in the distance. A tiny orange glow, a literal dot on the horizon, way off in the Atlantic. "Is that what I think it is?"

Crash! Glass breaking somewhere close by. I flinched, spinning around so Peter was at my back, shield raised. No one. But I could see lights flickering on the lawn where the guards were moving inside the house. "He showed it to you on the map, right?"

“Yeah, it looks about right from here. But how are we supposed to get there? He said it was a port, and there’s a land-bridge, but there’ll be way too much security for us to drive in. Not to mention how long it’ll take to catch up... Maybe if there was a boat…”

But there was no boat. I’d already seen the private dock from here and it was empty. Not that I’d know how to drive a boat anyways.

Scanning the wide lawn behind us, I squinted through the shadows of the trees. There seemed to be an extension of the house to the west, some sort of platform, with plain lawn surrounding. No trees or flowers, just plain grass. I frowned, sidling to the left to see around a willow standing between me and the view.

It took me a second to recognize the strange shape. The perked tail, the drooping propellers, rounded cockpit and rail-thin landing skids. Gull wing doors still open.

A helicopter, sitting quietly there on the stonework, moonlight glinting off its black metal.

I grinned. “Peter, I think I’ve got an idea…”

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I headcanon the driving AI in CA:WS was made and developed by Tony Stark; and this version here is the prototype xD

Slowly crawling to the finish line *wheezing* I’ll get there...some day *gasp*...I promise...
hella rad update

Chapter Summary

(too be deleted)

UPDATE NOT A CHAPTER

So basically this is just a big ol' author's note to let all y'all know that, since uploading this update right here, I've posted the complete rewrite of the entire fic. By that, I mean I've gone through the entire fic with a few prominent changes in mind, and several smaller ones, as well as general spelling, grammatical, and sentence/detail changes I've added or changed.

The most changes were made in the first seven chapters or so. Other scenes throughout have been rewritten. I think I've made edits in just about every chapter, but some are more prominent than others.

If you don't want to go back and read all of that (I don't blame you) here's the TL;DR version of the many edits I've made:

1) Mia's stay in the Crucible has increased from six months to two years. She was kidnapped when she was thirteen, in middle school (September 2010), and returns at the same time as she did in the previous version (November 2012).

2) Some names have been changed. In particular, Antony has become Dmitri. For the longest time I was never fully satisfied with his name (there are too many "Tonys" in this fic), and to me Dmitri just sounds better. Just a personal gripe from the author. This is why all fics are a WIP lol.

3) A better established friendship with Michelle starting before Mia was kidnapped. It wasn't entirely intentional but as I changed stuff I realized it fit in nicely. And it became big enough to mention, so there ya go.

4) some minor codenames and the like were also added or changed, in a way I think makes it feel more authentic. Soldatka and Vulkan in particular.

5) Much of Amelia's stutter has been eliminated after her return to New York, outside of situations where she's anxious or embarrassed.

6) several scenes have been rewritten to accommodate the plot changes. I also edited the reveal where Mia and Spider-Man fight. I didn't like how long it took for Mia to just get to the truth.

It's entirely up to you if you want to read it, but I'm posting this update separately so everyone knows, as the changes will affect the last few incoming chapters; so if you didn't read back and are confused in the future, that's why.

And because I still feel like I've wasted your time with this non-story update, I'll answer some review questions!
**Eala Bahn:** "...I literally only have ONE problems: How can Captain America be Mia's father if he wasn't pulled from the ice until 2011?"

**A:** The confusion the fic gives you is very much intentional. It's not supposed to make sense. You'll find out why in the future ;)

**TenebrisSagittarius:** "...i kind of missed soldier!mia, even if it sounds... wrong? bad? she needs to rediscover herself and her survival/combat knowledge quick and practice on it... it's a must, specially if she'll be involved in winter soldier"

**A:** Very good point! I personally enjoy writing her more survivor, "soldier" mindset as well lol. It definitely takes a front seat in the future. Mia has only recently learned to embrace that side of herself (re: the final Brandt fight), and will be much more willing to use it in the future.

**Guest:** "ngl i lowkey ship mj and mia (pls)"

**A:** tbh never thought about this before, I didn't think they had *that* much chemistry lol. I don't typically think of romance plotlines for Mia so she doesn't have any canon ships xD

**Guest:** "I was SO PUMPED when I saw this had been updated, and I was not disappointed! Can't wait to see what happens next and ooh what WILL happen when she meets Steve?"

**A:** No angst, none at all, that's for sureee (((:}
I realized pretty late in the game that the IM3 finale takes place in a cargo port, not an oil rig like I had originally assumed. A few edits regarding that.

To answer Lily (Guest)’s review: I don’t plan on uploading the old version of Rebel Columbia, and I sort of consider this doc/fic to be the original as is; I just edit it as I go along, since it’s still a WIP. I’m sorry if it disappoints you, I know I took out quite a bit. I could probably upload the “deleted scenes”, so to speak, as oneshots, since they’re still technically canon? I just found them to be unnecessary in the grand scheme of the fic, slowing down and padding out with information that had already been established.

I’d never tell Peter this, but I actually had no clue how to fly a helicopter.

But we hadn’t died yet, so I had to believe that was something else I had been taught in the Crucible. Didn’t teach me how to drive a car, but made sure I could pilot small aircraft. Go figure.

Stars began to appear, twinkling in and out as we left the city area. The radio crackled but I ignored it, pulling the chopper down low, maybe five hundred feet above water level. I didn’t know a lot about air traffic control laws, but I wanted to stay below anyone’s radar — literally.

The distant red pinpoint on the horizon gradually brightened, growing larger until I could start making out details. Cranes, metal shipping containers, and surrounding carriers bobbing in the water. Large suspension towers interlaced with catwalks and stairways. It looked like a 3D maze. A container terminal, where ships traded cargo and fuel before heading to distant port. Most prominently: the massive Christmas tree, lit up in the thousands of lights, and suspended above it, hanging by his arms on a pair of wire was a small human form, swaying gently on the wind.

“Well, he definitely has a sense of pageantry,” I muttered, starting to feel sick to my stomach. The entire terminal looked like a death trap — I could make out the armed patrols, watching from suspended catwalks and towers. There was no way we’d get near unnoticed.

Peter shifted nervously in his seat, hands gripped tightly around the belt straps. He looked ready to bail at any second; his expression was hidden behind his mask, but his voice was not. “S-so, this is it, huh? The final showdown?”

“I hope so,” I said, tone equally as tense. I wasn’t sure how much more I could take from Extremis, terrorizing me and sowing international discord. Tonight, only one side was going to make it out alive.
“Okay!” Peter said, voice cracking into a squeak. He coughed, then added, “Y-you, uh, you ready?”

“No,” I admitted. Even if Tony Stark was already on the terminal, we were seriously outnumbered. Even outmatched.

“Good! Me neither,” Peter sounded immensely relieved. “I really don’t want to die.”

“I won’t let that happen,” I said, nearly right away. The very thought sent a stroke of panic through me, a deep sense of regret. Were we crazy? Was I really taking Peter into a life-or-death battle in which one or both of us might not make it out alive?

Fuck. Was it too late to turn back?

My regret turned to shame. If I bent to my fear, then I’d be a coward. I glanced at Peter, fighting against the rapid beating in my heart. “I-if you don’t want to do this —”

“What?” Peter blurted before I was even done, sounding genuinely surprised. “We got this far, haven’t we? We gotta help Mr. Stark! He needs to know about the Mandarin!”

“Right, yeah,” I blinked, shook my head, refocused myself. I reminded myself that this was necessary; that we had to do this. Maybe I just didn’t want Peter to go with me. Maybe it’d be safer if I had gone on my own. Knowing what Extremis and Killian could do, I wanted Peter as far away as possible from them.

Too late now.

“It’ll be fine,” Peter said, as if sensing my growing uncertainty.

Then, a comet came streaking past the window.

“Holy shit!” I yanked hard on the cyclic and collective throttle at once. The helicopter’s blades whine in complaint as we veered hard right, just as three more rockets shot past, above and below.

Peter let out a cry, his head nearly smacking the glass in the breakneck roll. “What are those? Missiles?”

I couldn’t tell. The water was completely black below us; had I missed something flying over? Were we being attacked from behind?

A fifth rocket, then another. All missing us completely, flying straight for the container terminal ahead. All distinctly man-sized, powered by four small repulsors.

“No, wait…” Righting the helicopter, I frowned, squinting through the dark and the glare of the window. “I think they’re suits!”

“Iron Man?” Peter gasped, sitting forward in his seat. We watched in awe as over a dozen — two dozen, three — pulses of light came flying in, converging on the terminal. There they stopped, hovering over the warm glow, their human silhouettes in stark relief.

An army of metal.


And then, at once, they attacked.

“Well, so much for the element of surprise,” Peter huffed, a little miffed that Tony Stark had beat us
“Surprise or not,” I said, wincing as we drew nearer and a rattle of gunshots hit the chopper’s tail. “I don’t think they were expecting us.”

We were now within thirty meters of the terminal and coming in hot — I could feel the impact of bullets shaking the throttles in my grip. I yanked hard left, circling around the container terminal instead of over it. All around us, iron suits swooped in and out, up and down, engaging directly with the Mandarin’s forces. Most of them seemed too busy to notice one measly helicopter, although I did get the satisfaction of accidentally knocking one Extremis off a catwalk when a skid glanced off the side of a watch tower. The look of pure shock on his face was priceless.

I maneuvered the helicopter a little lower, over the main control hub; it was the best I could do — it was nowhere near close to the man strung up over the Christmas tree, and I had no idea where Tony Stark was. There were too many suits flying; which one contained Tony was impossible to tell, if he was even in any of them at all. I just hoped there was enough tall structures nearby for Peter to swing from and not get shot.

“Bombs away!” I said, and without asking what I meant Peter opened his door with a flick of toe, already squirming out of his chair.

My hearing was blown out completely by the sudden gale winds blasting into the helicopter’s interior. I flipped my goggles down to be able to see through the wind and debris in my face, taking a second to adjust to the sea of red filling my vision.

I slightly tilted the helicopter, so Peter could drop out instead of jumping, and avoid the wrath of the chopper’s blades. I expected him to leave right away, leap into the fray, but threw him a curious look when Peter lingered instead. I heard his voice, but the words were lost in the roar of the wind.

“What?” I shouted back.

“SHIELD!” Peter clarified, raising his voice. “Did they give you a code name?”

I blinked at him, a little taken aback. Peter was asking this now, of all times?

Then again, I did not have a plan to land the chopper. Better to ask now than never. Peter hung onto a ceiling handle, watching and waiting for me to answer as we hovered over the container terminal, lights flashing behind him.

My tongue felt dry. I swallowed pointlessly. “Rebel Columbia. That’s what they called me.”

I immediately regretted saying that. The name was just a reminder of the Crucible, of the invisible bars still caging my mind. Saying it, I still felt like a scared little thirteen-year-old trapped in a body too big, too old for her. Cursed, like Frankenstein, to never quite belong, no matter what I did.

How could I ever explain to Peter the origin of that name?

“Wicked!” Peter said, and I could hear the grin in his voice — and it was somehow infectious. He seemed genuinely impressed and I smiled back, nervous, but believing I hadn’t made a mistake.

And with that, Peter leapt out the door. “Yeehaw!”

Someday. Someday I’d tell him.

I was about to have bigger problems in a moment.
As soon as Peter was gone, I pushed on the throttle and lifted the helicopter up and away from the base of the terminal. Unfortunately, I wasn’t paying attention to what was above when I had been talking to Peter.

Crunch. The helicopter shook as something landed behind me. Suddenly, the whole helicopter started pulling hard to the left, beyond my control, and it was all I could do to keep ahold of the controls as the helicopter started spinning away from the terminal. Before I could figure out what had happened, a molten hand smashed through the window of my door. I cried out, turning away as hot glass cut into my face.

Metal screeched and the roar of wind opened up. I looked back and the door was gone. Against the light of the terminal was the black and glowing silhouette of an Extremis agent.

I didn’t get a chance to see his face before the hand found my throat. “A surprise to see you here, sweetheart.”

Savin.

I choked against the burning grip, fighting the urge to let go of the controls and punch him, or free myself. One mistake and I’d send us both crashing into an early grave.

Instead, I lifted my leg off the pedals and kicked Savin in the gut. It didn’t get him off the helicopter but it wrenched his grip free of my neck and gave me a chance to right the helicopter, then tilt it to his side again. Savin grunted as he was suddenly holding on for dear life, feet dangling over the terminal a hundred feet below, hands melting through the metal sides of the helicopter.

“You just couldn’t leave well enough alone, could you?” Savin demanded, and in the shadow of the whirling blades I could see his face had changed. New scars formed along his jaw and ear, as if he’d taken a blast that hadn’t healed correctly. “You had a perfectly good out and you still came looking for more! Guess Brandt was right about you after all!”

I tried kicking him again but missed, and in return Savin lunged upwards, grabbing ahold of my seatbelt. I gasped as my weight suddenly slid down, the controls following me. The chopper dropped a few degrees, making my stomach flip.

Savin was pulling himself in, and with his hand burning through the seatbelt I had nothing else keeping me in the helicopter. Out of instinct I rolled it back up again — then jerked it hard. Savin let out a cry as he flew in past me, hitting the passenger seat on my right.

With him caught off guard, I had a few seconds to act. Thinking fast, I swung the helicopter around so it was away from the terminal — longer to fall, I suppose, but more space to move and less likely to hit anyone I didn’t want to hit.

Savin threw a fist at my and I let go of the cyclic to block it. The helicopter veered hard but maintained altitude. It had the handy effect of throwing him off me again, but he was clinging to the seat and was ripping off the passenger door. Savin was going to tear this helicopter apart with me still in it.

I was trapped in here. I’d stand a better chance of fighting him if I could get out, but how would I ever have enough time to land safely?

I had another problem: there was no place to land.

“Oh, man,” I sighed to myself, already resigned to my fate. “I really wish I had a better idea than
Then I flew the helicopter straight into the ocean.

It was crazy. Maybe the craziest thing I’d ever done, right below attacking the Winter Soldier, which I still considered my dumbest move of the year.

Either way, I had about two seconds to get out of the helicopter before it hit black water. I had just barely enough time to scramble out of my seatbelt and jump

— through the missing door Savin had ripped him —

— Him letting out a furious shout —

— dropping into empty air —

— as the helicopter exploded into flames onto the waves beneath me.

I brought my arms up to my head, preparing myself to hit the water right next to the crash. Instead, my entire body rattled as a pair of metal arms caught me, just as I started to feel the heat of the flames rise up to meet my body.

Gasping, I looked over to see the metal face of an iron man suit, turning its head to look at me as it flew at breakneck speed over the terminal. “Good evening, Miss Fletcher. Would you like for me to set you down?”

“Yes, please!” I said breathlessly, heart pounding. I figured my survival odds were in my favor, but I still hadn’t counted on an unexpected rescue.

JARVIS sounded utterly calm, as if nothing about this evening worried him in the least. I wondered what was going on in that metal head of his. JARVIS dropped me onto the terminal’s cement and I staggered to maintain balance. The landing jolted my knees and I hadn’t even gotten my bearings yet when I heard a shout:

“Mia!”

Peter dropped down, tackling me head-on and sending my flying over a low metal barrier. We landed on the floor below, just as a spatter of gunfire hit the ground next to us.

We braced ourselves against the wall, safely behind cover. I squeezed my eyes shut through the gunfire. Silently prayed that last explosion took out Savin.

Thoroughly rattled at this point, I didn’t hear Peter’s voice until several seconds after he’d already spoken. “Holy crap, are you okay?! I saw the helicopter go down and —”

“I’m fine, I’m fine!” I shouted, too loud, ears still blown out from the helicopter and following explosion. “Just a little nauseous —”

“THIS WAS NOT WHAT I MEANT ABOUT STANDING A LITTLE HIGHER.”

I blinked, startled as a furious Tony Stark shouted at me from the catwalk overhead. I looked up just in time to see him drop down, covered in only pieces of his suit to glare at the both of us. It suddenly felt very right to be cowering where we were.

“You two just — the audacity!” Tony threw out his arms. He looked even more beat-up than the
last time I saw him. At least he was still alive. “I told you I had it handled! I didn’t mean it as a
challenge!”

“Mr. Stark, we thought you needed help, so we —”

“Decided to steal a helicopter? Yeah, no big deal! Did you even consider how you were going to get
off here?”

Peter and I exchanged regretful looks, before admitting, “...No.”

A third voice interrupted us, a man in a green shirt and a pistol. It took me a moment to recognize
him from TV. Colonel James Rhodes. He scowled at the gathered group, looking increasingly
alarmed. “What the hell is going on?”

“Look, just go save the President! I got it covered!” Tony snapped, trying to wave Rhodes off.

“That’s what you said last time, and the Mandarin strung you up on a mattress —”

“The Mandarin did what?” I did a double-take. That did not sound right.

Peter, however, was on the ball. “It doesn’t matter! Look, we came here to tell you that Killian didn’t
just make Extremis! He’s also the Mandarin, he’s behind everything!”

“W-what?” Tony blinked, caught off-guard. His hand went to his ear immediately. “JARVIS, find
Pepper. Now!”

“On it, Sir.”

Rhodes threw the two of us a wide-eyed look, then back to Stark. “Tony, why are there kids
here?”

“We just want to help —” Peter tried again.

Tony jabbed a finger at us. “Do not tell me that was the only reason you two came here! Don’t let
their little faces fool you, Rhodey, they’re trouble!”

“Yeah? And how old are they?” Col. Rhodes scowled.

“Not important!” Tony replied quickly, looking a little stricken. Rhodes seemed angry enough at him
already. He jabbed a finger at both of us. “This is why minors shouldn’t have superpowers!”

Rhodes came to a stand, wincing slightly as an Extremis was sent screaming overboard, falling just
inches away over the edge of the walkway. “Well, it’s too late now. How does the Mandarin being
Killian change things?”

Tony deliberated on it for a moment. “Honestly, not much. Makes it personal, I guess. It also means
he won’t stop until he gets what he wants. It’s not just about the show anymore. It’s about the
message. Everything he’s done so far as led up to this moment and he can’t lose now. Which means
it’s way too dangerous for a couple of kids! JARVIS, I need you to call a car —”

“Right away, Sir. ETA twenty minutes.”

“Twenty minutes? God, we’ll probably all be dead by then —”

“Why can’t we help?” I demanded, wincing at how petulant I sounded. But instead of backing off, I
decided to double-down, and shot to my feet. “You know what we’re capable of and you know the
Mandarin only cares about you. He didn’t plan for us — any of us,” I added towards Rhodes, who
looked just a tiny bit mollified. “And we have a skillset they don’t. So why not use us?”

“You mean aside from breaking at least a dozen laws in the Geneva Convention?” Tony shot back. “No, no reason at all.”

“Well,” Rhodey began hesitantly. “They could help with the President.”

“What?” Tony blurted, looking at his friend aghast.

“I know, I know! The ethics of it are killing me, but!” Rhodes held up a finger. “After everything you’ve told me, I think it’s safe to say they’re not just going to sit here twiddling their thumbs while we do all the hard work. At least one of them helps me rescue the President, okay? You’re already busy with Pepper and Killian, and I’m gonna need the help anyways, since someone forgot to program any of the iron suits to my biometrics!”

Tony did not meet his gaze. He cleared his throat awkwardly. “Okay, well — fine! Parker, you’re with me. Pepper’s up there —” he pointed to a tower that overlooked the terminal. It’s windows glowed from the inside. “ — and she’s the first on my list. I need you to clear a way — safely! — without engaging the Extremis guys, okay? Just get them out of my way. You got that? No funny business!”

“No funny business, sir!” Peter repeated, giving a stilted salute before jumping to his feet and taking off in a bouncy spring.

At the same time, an Iron suit had been called down to pick up Colonel Rhodes, flying off in the direction of the Christmas tree, the President. I was still reeling from the knowledge Pepper Potts was here. That was who he meant, wasn’t it? I’d heard about the new CEO of Stark Industries but until now I had no idea she was even a major player in all of this. The Mandarin had her kidnapped, too? Guess he really did want to make it personal for Stark.

After a moment’s hesitation, I got up and started to follow Rhodes, my fingers starting to feel a little numb. A part of this didn’t seem real. The adults seemed to accept our presence too easily — then again, they didn’t have much of a choice. Peter and I had inserted ourselves into the problem, not really thinking about the morals conundrum it might put into more ethical adults in the world. Tony Stark, ethical? Say it ain’t so.

My opinion of him still wasn’t super-high at the moment, or at least I was too distracted to pay attention when I heard him call my name from behind.

“Hold on, I’m not done with you!” Tony Stark called, but I kept walking. “Hey, Mini-Cap!”

I came to a sudden stop, rage spiking. I whirled around. “Don’t call me that!”

“Then stop giving me a reason to!” Tony Stark snapped back. He caught up with me, gesturing upwards to the fighting between Extremis and his suits. “We both know you aren’t him, so why are you doing this, kid, huh? I know Peter’s just as responsible for talking you into this, but I didn’t see you raising a lot of complaints, either. Why are you putting your life on the line for a country — for people — who are never going to thank you?”

“I don’t know! Am I not supposed to?”

“No! No one would ask you of that. Shouldn’t! You’re just a kid, dammit. You and Peter both! Don’t tell me it's for your country, or honor, duty, or whatever, that’s just you defending your home. Anyone would do that. But there’s other people who do that for you. Like me, for example. And yet
you’re still fighting the Mandarin! You’re still doing this! Why?"

I glared at the pavement, fists clenching at the demands sent my way, anger clawing up my heart. My eyes flicked up to meet Tony Stark’s. “Because they don’t want me to.”

“Well, no offense, but that’s pretty messed up,” Tony Stark squinted at me, perhaps gauging the truth. Was I really just acting out of spite, or was there something else beneath it all?

He opened his mouth to pass more judgement, but a sudden screech interrupted him — we both looked up to see a tower leg start to melt from an Extremis soldier, and panic flashed across Stark’s face. He looked back down at me, saying, “You know what, I don’t say this a lot, but we’re gonna discuss this later, okay? Right now, I gotta go save my girlfriend before she kills me for ruining Christmas.”

And with that, he stepped back, held out his arms, and another suit flew down to swallow him up. I craned my neck back to watch him fly up to the tower above, before turning on my heel and chasing after Rhodes.

I knew the President’s life was at stake, but now I had the thought of a future Stark lecture in the back of my mind. Fantastic. I couldn’t wait.

The nickname also grated on my nerves, and I was glad no one else had been around to hear it. Its stupidity was bad enough, but it got me wondering, too: would Tony Stark tell Captain America — Steve Rogers — about me?

It was too much to think about right now. I pushed it all out of my mind and focused on the task at hand.

Save the President. Stop the Mandarin. Make it home before Aunt May grounds us.

Simple enough.

The entire terminal was a din of chaos. Screaming, explosions, the screech of metal and the blast of rockets and repulsors. The terminal constantly shook with explosions, falling crates, shifting cranes. JARVIS was giving the Extremis agents a run for their money, a dozen robots swooping in and out of my field of view like a swarm of demented bats. As many as there were, however, they were just hollow metal, and if one flew too close to an Extremis, the man or woman could rip the suit apart with their bare hands — just watching it made me sick to my stomach. Tony Stark was losing his advantage in numbers, and fast.

The smell of smoke, ozone, and burning oil was thick; the container terminal was an entire war zone surrounded by a void of blackness. It made me feel incredibly claustrophobic. I could just barely make out the coast of Florida in the distance, but other than that, we were completely alone out here in the middle of the ocean. If there was any more help out there, it wasn’t arriving anytime soon.

Colonel Rhodes had been dropped some thirty meters away, two stories up. I found a staircase, but he was on an opposite catwalk facing the President’s oil rig — with nothing but twenty feet of clean air between us. Hop, skip, and a leap. Taking a deep breath, I launched myself over the guardrail and landed on some suspended piping, jumping across to an I-beam before throwing myself the last ten feet and catching the other catwalk by my hands.

The landing shook the metal flooring, making Rhodes jump and turn around. “Damn! Don’t do that —”

“Behind you!” I had just hauled myself up over the railing when I spotted two Extremis soldiers
charging down the ramp. Rhodes’ back was to them so I lunged forward, pulling out my shield and more or less tackling Rhodes as a smattering of gunshots hit Vibranium.

Rhodes was letting off a stream of curses, scrambling for his own gun to fire back. The Extremis goons dropped their guns — apparently favoring close combat — and kept coming at us.

I managed to scramble to my knees, giving myself enough room for one good throw. Just as Rhodes readied himself and fired two shots, the Vibranium shield rocketed off the floor of the catwalk and slammed into the chin of the furthest Extremis, sending him toppling over the railing and onto the boat below.

The bullets did nothing to Extremis Rhodes had struck. He flinched a little, but the wounds healed over in an instant. Just as the guy was starting to smirk in triumph, the shield came back and hit him across the back of the head.

He stumbled, dazed, and three more bullets were enough force to send him, too, over the edge.

I caught the shield as it returned to me. Rhodes slumped against the railing for a moment, taking me in with an appraising look. “That’s not...is that a Vibranium shield?”

“Oh, it’s a rental.” I couldn’t tell if he was impressed or upset; Nerves had me smiling like an idiot.

Rhodey’s eyebrows shot up, and he just nodded. “Okay, cool. Great. The President’s down there —” he gestured down to the hanging figure, a dozen spotlights focused on the metal suit. “I can get to him via the suspension cables, but it looks like we’re about to have more company.”

As he said this, I noticed more Extremis agents climbing in from other levels, looking pissed and glowing in the dark. At least it was easy to spot them.

“You got the shield, so you cover me.” Rhodey looked down, then back at me. “Fletcher, right?”

I jolted a little, taken aback. He knew my name? “How — ?”

“Tony’s got a mouth.” Rhodey shrugged, smiling slightly.

Then, before I could say anything, he jumped over the edge of the railing, using his belt to zipline down to a suspended container meant to be deposited onto the oil rig. It was currently stopped mid-air, probably due to the ongoing fight. Rhodes landed on top of the corrugated metal a second before three extremis did.

His bullets did, of course, nothing, and the first to attack him inadvertently melted one of the suspension cables. I watched, helpless and horrified, as the container canted sharply and Rhodes lost his balance, going over the side.

But he caught the lip, hanging on for dear life, as the Extremis agents slow sidled down, laughing.

Instead of just standing there helplessly, I anticipated what Rhodey was about to do before he did it — hanging by three wires, the container swayed dangerously in the ocean wind. Towards the President.

I heard the gunshot but didn’t see it. I had already taken off running down the ramp, leaping over the stairs at the end and hitting the landing a floor below. I skirted past an alarmed Extremis soldier moments before he was taken out by an incoming suit, took a sharp turn right and raced along the dock on the outside of the oil rig just in time to see Col. Rhodes and the President, stuck in the War Machine armor, make a hard landing right in front of me.
Below us, the ship exploded. The container — and the Extremis agents trapped on it — crashed into the oil barrels on board, sending up a massive plume of smoke.

I shielded my eyes, wincing. I had an unpleasant flashback to the *HMS Adelaide*. I wondered if it had just been a rehearsal for what Killian had planned to do the President tonight.

Remembering myself, I turned back to the adults, feeling like an idiot but still needing to ask: “Are you okay?”

“F-fine,” Rhodes, who’d fallen on his face, was a little wobbly getting back to his feet. He gave an awkward salute to President Ellis, who thumped around awkwardly in the unpowered suit. “Mr. President, I’m gonna need that suit back.”

The President looked extraordinarily relieved — and sweaty — as the suit opened up and he dropped out, falling to his knees before Rhodes helped him back up again. To me, Rhodes said, “Fletcher, I need you to escort the President to Tony’s car, we need to get him out of here.”

Sure, I had a Vibranium shield, but I didn’t have a whole-ass iron man suit. I also didn’t have a name as cool as War Machine. “Okay, but why not you?”

“Because I gotta make sure Tony doesn’t get his ass ki — whoa!”

Rhodey jumped out of the way as a red-and-blue figure swooped in, carrying something much larger than him in his arms. The three of us stared as Peter — Spider-Man — dropped down, a very frazzled-looking red-headed woman in his arms.

“Oh, my god!” the woman cried, practically jumping out of Peter’s arms, whirling around with her hands on her head. “You just — how did — are you one of Tony’s friends?”

“What just happened?” I demanded, alarmed. Above us, a siren blared, and I looked up to see wreckage of a container come down in burning metal debris not a hundred meters away. Each landing shook the ground we stood on. “Is Stark still up there?”

“I-I think so,” Peter replied, wincing and covering his head as a suit swooped in low, carrying a screaming Extremis soldier. “He was trying to save her, but there was this hole and she was stuck and he was too far away and then she fell and — and I caught her! I caught her in mid-air! I’ve never done that before! It was so cool!”

“You mean terrifying,” The woman, who I assumed to be Pepper Potts, corrected, pushing long hair out of her face. She wasn’t wearing much, just a sports bra and some black leggings — not even shoes. Although it was a little chilly, she didn’t seem cold. “What are you, twelve?”

Peter looked affronted. “Fifteen!”

“Oh, Mr. President!” Pepper, completely oblivious, turned around and stared at President Ellis, who was starting look a little forlorn in his rumpled suit. “I’m so glad you’re okay —”

“Ah, thank you, ma’am —” President Ellis took her hand, blinking in a daze as Pepper suddenly approached him. “Oh, damn, your hands are warm —”

I didn’t get to hear the rest of the pleasantries when my ears caught a clicking noise to my left. It was distant, and I probably wouldn’t have noticed it if it hadn’t sounded so delicate compared to the rest of the chaos happening around us.
I looked around just in time to see Savin, standing on a catwalk a hundred feet away, aiming a rocket launcher at us.

“Holy sh —” the curse wasn’t even out of my mouth when he fired. I just had time to shove Ellis and Pepper out of the way, and take the full force of the rocket onto my shield.

Vibranium could absorb plenty of force, but my feet could not. Upon impact, I was immediately lifted off the ground — the shield protected my face and body, but the compressed hot air of the following explosion sent me flying backwards.

Land, sky, water. Head over heels. Just pure air between me and a hard landing. I could feel the residual heat through my clothes even as the wind cooled me. Something was burning. The shield fell from my arm, torn away. I saw a flash of fire and echoing cries before the metal deck of the burning oil tanker came rushing up to meet my face.

I guess if there was one thing I had to be thankful of, it was being unable to remember the landing.

I blinked, and next second I was lying on my stomach, face plastered to sticky metal, the world spinning around me like a Merry-Go-Round. My brain was mush in my head, and I felt like I was falling although I was pretty sure I was just lying there like a corpse. Nausea washed over my as I tried, with shaky elbows, to lift myself up. Trying not to heave, I dropped my forehead to the floor, trying to catch my breath. My lungs protested, feeling constricted. It felt like someone slammed a battering ram into my chest.

Then something grabbed the back of my jacket and, none too kindly, lifted me up and threw me aside. I landed on my back, head striking the corner of a wooden crate. Shit. I’d lost my helmet too.

I’d probably be alarmed to see Savin languidly walking over to me, wondering how he caught up to me so fast — but I was still alarmed he even alive to begin with. What did it take with these guys? This time, I wasn’t lucky enough to have a broken power line to help me out.

“Smile, sweetheart!” Savin grinned savagely. “We’re live!”

I thought he was being facetious, but when I looked up I realized Savin was right; there were at least eight camera stands around the President’s initial standpoint; to capture his fiery death for posterity, apparently. Now, the cameras were focused on us — were they still recording?

I didn’t want to think about it; still, I was glad I had my goggles on nonetheless. Maybe Peter had a point about masks.

He raised his fit and brought it down, veins burning. I rolled out of the way, but in the process nearly started to heave again. I could feel something warm and wet dripping down through my hair, into the back of my shirt. I winced, trying to think through the pain. No time to get killed now.

I looked around for something to help. I had no shield, no weapon. The deck of the ship, which had once been stage to the President’s apparent death, was now a maze of fire, crates, and oil spills. Fantastic. If the shield wasn’t here, it may have fallen over the side, into the water.

I didn’t want to think about that possibility.

Granted, I didn’t have my shield when fighting Brandt, but I hadn’t just been hit by a rocket either. To say I was on even footing with Savin, who looked even more pissed off and damaged than usual, was maybe overselling it.

Savin came at me again and I dodged, stumbling as my jostled sense of balance overcorrected. There
was a loud, high-pitched siren, like a tea kettle, and I wasn’t sure if that was another alarm going off at the terminal, or just my ears ringing. Either way, it was hard to hear past it.

I retaliated with a kick to the back of the knee as I swerved around him, but I was still off-balance so my blow wasn’t as strong as intended. Savin didn’t even flinch as he whirled around and followed up with a fist. I dodged, but it was a feint. His other fist came up and clocked me straight across the jaw.

I reeled back, cheek burning. I cursed under my breath. If my head wasn’t so rattled I would’ve seen it coming. Still, I shook it off. The heat was a sharp wake-up call, and my vision cleared enough to see the next attack coming.

Savin straight up lunging for me, both arms outstretched, going for my throat.

“Mia!” Savin didn’t get a chance to touch me before a pair of red converse sneakers slammed into his face.

Savin went flying, landing beyond an oil blaze and out of sight. Peter landed on a stack of barrels to my left, jumping down and catching me just as I started to wobble a little. “Mia! Are you all right?”

“F-fine,” I mumbled, wiping at my lip. My glove came away bloody. I had no idea I had injured my face. I scowled, trying to focus on the red ski mask in front of me. “I n-need my shield.”

“I don’t know where it is, i didn’t see where it — duck!” Peter grabbed my shoulder and forced my head down, just in time to avoid a giant metal can thrown in our direction.

As it went sailing over, Peter caught it with two shots from his web-shooters and threw it right back. Just as Savin was stepping out of the blaze.

He brought up his arms to protect himself, but the oil drum still exploded, sending boiling black liquid everywhere. It caught on fire on immediate contact, but Savin hardly seemed phased. Seeing the two of us standing together, he just spat. “I’m sick of seeing you two everywhere I go.”

“Funny,” I huffed, glancing at Peter. He gave me a tight nod. “I was thinking the same thing.”

Savin sneered. “This ends tonight.”

And then it was on.

Shield gone, helmet off, cameras out, there was no going back, it seemed. Maybe I should’ve been more concerned about my face, but considering the fact it seemed to be literally raining hell tonight, as well as the fact that Savin was going to kill me, Peter, or both, nothing else really seemed to matter.

I wasn’t sure where Rhodey was, if he was in his War Machine suit or not. Maybe he’d gone off to help Tony Stark like he said. There had still been no sign of the Mandarin up to this point, so I assumed the two of them would have their hands full.

“Stay out of his range,” I told Peter, who replied with a tight, fearful nod. “He’s at his worst up close.”

It was true, but I also knew close quarters was a weak spot for Peter. He had the advantage of movement, speed, and ranged weaponry (if you could call a web-shooter that), but he lacked any sort of hand-to-hand knowledge. In the end, Peter was just a kid in a suit. He could only take a punch
because he was stronger than me, but I wasn’t sure what that meant in the long run, and wasn’t about to start testing now.

Right now, I just wanted Peter to stay safe. I could take the punches if I had to, shield or no shield.

Upon approaching us, Savin knocked over a wooden crate of weapons. Bullets fell from their cases, spilling out over the hot metal — before going off like pop rocks, the heat setting off the gunpowder.

But it was fine. It was fine.

We flinched back, unable to approach without getting inadvertently shot.

It’s fine.

That gave Savin just a bit of a head start. Seeing an opportunity, he charged.

(It was not fine).

Peter leapt into the air, finding a high bar to swing from. As Savin redirected at me, Peter swung around and drop-kicked him from behind. It sent Savin stumbling forward, only to twist around, grab Peter’s ankle, and throw him.

With a yelp, Peter crashed through a stack of oil drums, but Savin was too busy grinning at the sight to see me coming up while his back was turned.

Only at the last second, he saw my fist out of the corner of his eye.

Savin recoiled, but came back just as strong. Blow to the gut — I side-stepped and caught his outstretched arm, delivering my left elbow to his nose. Tit for tat.

It crunched, flattening with a burst of sparks. It’d heal, surely, but for the moment he was distracted. Still having a hold on his arm, I flipped him over my back.

That pissed him off enough to immediately lunge at me. Then stopped, surprised.

Savin hissed, glaring back at his fist caught in webbing. Then at Peter way in the back, pulling hard and holding Savin in place.

Grunting, frustrated, Savin tried to pull back his fist from the webbing. His hand was already starting to melt through it, but Peter strengthened his hold by using his other web-shooter.

Then, Peter let go. Savin was pulling back so hard, he nailed himself right in the face.

Peter cackled. “Hey, stop punching yourself!”

I would’ve laughed, too, if my body wasn’t racing with adrenaline.

Instead, I delivered a kick to the knee and followed up with a sucker punch to the gut. Savin keeled over, but did not fall.

Hitting him a lot wasn’t going to be enough, I knew. This wasn’t a guy you could just beat to death. So I wasn’t altogether surprised when he brought his fist to his mouth, and blew, just as I was about to slam my elbows onto his back.

A burst of sparks left his palm and flew straight into my eyes. I flinched, closed my eyes, but not in time. Crying out as the tiny flakes burned my cheeks and brow, I didn’t see it when Savin sent a kick
straight to my exposed chest and sent me flying back into a pile of crates.

Dry wood and straw broke my fall, along with an assortment of guns and explosives.

I couldn’t get out of there fast enough.

Despite successfully distracting me, Savin didn’t immediately pounce, and when I could see again I understood why. Peter had done exactly what I told him not to and got close to Savin, trying to block his way. “Hey, Zippo Lighter!”

Savin responded typically, by taking a swing at Peter — who dodged that and the following feint, for his part, but didn’t anticipate Savin absorbing his own blow. Peter yelped as Savin’s fist crushed around his wrist, metal crunching as his web-shooter was destroyed.

Peter was too distracted by the pain and the loss of one of his gadgets to see the fist coming for his head. He went down like sack of bricks.

No no no! Horrified, I was just getting to my feet as I witnessed this, and tried to run for him — only to stumble, tripping as my toe caught on something.

I looked down. Christmas lights, broken, some still flickering, from the fallen Christmas decoration.

I looked back up at Savin, throwing Peter to the ground as he tried to get up again. Peter was heavily favoring his right arm — I feared Savin might have broken his wrist. Peter was unable to protect his injury and fight off Savin at the same time. Savin seemed determined to break his other web-shooter, trying to get a shot at Peter’s other arm.

At least I had an idea.

Grabbing a fistful of corded lights, I yanked them loose and charged at Savin, shouting only a brief warning: “Mav!”

Peter gasped when Savin paused mid-punch. Savin looked around — right in time to take my knee to his face when I jumped.

My intention wasn’t to get onto Savin’s shoulders, but he seemed to think so and was quick to shove me away. Too bad he didn’t see the lights that followed me, the lasso as it fell around his head as I hit the ground.

“What the —” Savin scowled, right before I yanked tight.

I was a little slow on the draw, having hesitated to make sure Peter got away in time. So the lasso tightened around Savin’s knees instead of his arms and torso, but the effect was even better than I planned. The lasso tightened instantly, snapping his legs together and knocking Savin flat on his back.

“Hey, this reminds me of a joke,” Peter said, whooping as he scampered away, crawling up a stack of crates to safety. As he spoke, he made an impromptu sling out of some webbing. “What sound does a tree make when it falls in a forest and no one’s around?”

“Shut up!” Savin shouted, wriggling.

“Ooh, never heard that one before —”

Savin tried to get up, but was further hindered by Peter, who used his last web-shooter to cover the
man head-to-foot in webs — like a spider mummifying its prey. Rubbing at my scorched cheeks, I watched in growing amusement as Savin’s shouts turned to muffled screams.

“Well, that wasn’t so hard!” Peter said, dropping down next to me with a satisfied huff. His suit was more soot-and-smoke than red-and-blue now. “You think Aunt May is gonna notice my arm when we get ba—?”

That’s when the mummified Savin exploded.

Peter and I cried out, jumping back as flaming, melted bits of web flew everywhere.

“You little shits!”

He came flying to his feet, red-hot and absolutely murderous. He stepped into a river of oil — going up instantly. I just had time to grab Peter and wrap myself around him before a searing wall of fire roared up. Just being in the vicinity nearly burned me, and I was thankful we’d gotten out of the way before it could actually touch us.

“Go!” Making sure I was between Savin and Peter, I pushed Peter ahead of me, giving him more space to run and get some distance. He stumbled forward, right arm in a sling as he lifted the other in the air and lifted himself off the ground in a quick swing. I wasn’t sure how much more of a beating Peter could take before he was down for the count.

Or dead.

Don’t think about that. Don’t even consider it a possibility. I shook off the terrible thought, focusing only on the outcome I wanted. If I put too much worry on the worst possible end to this, then I’d only set myself up for failure.

Facing off Savin, I was already at a disadvantage, backed up into a corner. He came at me fast and I absorbed his next few blows, counting the seconds and wondering where the hell Peter went to. Not a lot of time had passed, but every moment counted when it was life or death.

Arms up to cover my exposed face. Ears starting to ring again as burning fists struck me — arms, shoulders, stomach, legs. The best I could do was push forward a little, not get pushed out of the ring, ignoring the flickering yellow lights and musty smell of old cement of the Crucible —

“Mia, I found it!” Peter called somewhere behind me.

“Incoming!”

I let Savin strike me at the last second — absorbing a kick to the gut and letting it send me backwards, back into the pile of broken wood and ammunition.

It got me out of the way just in time.

Peter’s voice was preamble to a small object smacking Savin in the chest, exploding, then followed by the loud clang as my shield came swinging on on a rope of web, bouncing off Savin’s chin and sent him reeling backwards.

I saw the opportunity and took it.

The explosion wounded Savin but didn’t seem to affect him much. The hole in his chest was already starting to close. As I rushed in, fist clenched tight, I could see his burning heart, beating hard between two lungs.
Just as the rib cage was about to close, I slammed my fist into his chest — felt the muscle burn my skin like acid — before yanking it back out again, hissing in pain.

Savin grunted, caught by surprise. He looked down at me, confused, then smirking. “That didn’t hurt.”

“No,” I said. At the same time, I felt the gust of wind as Peter swung around, caught me by the waist. As he lifted me off the ground, I gave Savin the bird. “But this will.”

From my middle finger spun the pin of a grenade.

“Wha —” Savin’s eyes widened with realization, and his hands clutched at his now-healed chest and the foreign object inside. He snarled, “You bitch —”

Peter had already swung me high up in the air when Savin exploded.

It was like a fireworks show gone bad. First Savin’s chest was gone, then the rest of him disintegrated in a furious roar. Under the blossoming flames, the oil tanker bowed under the heat and pressure, groaning in protest. Either end of the boat lifted into the air as its compromised middle started to fill with water, quickly boiling and quenching the raising fires spreading across the deck.

I watched it all in awe, as Peter swooped down and landed, with surprising grace, back onto the terminal’s dock. Considering how banged up I was, I appreciated the gentle handling.

Peter, on the other hand, wasn’t looking so hot.

“Whoa,” His eyes, too, were on the catastrophe that remained of Savin. He staggered against a crate, much of his suit burned or badly singed, and looking badly shaken. “That was... violent.”

Just as his knees were about to buckle, I caught Peter’s arm and held him up. In a daze, he handed me my shield, which he had managed to hang onto. Not really concerned with it, I quickly shoved it onto my back before helping him sit. “All worn out, huh?”

“What?” Peter jolted, shaking his head and straightening all of a sudden. “No way! I-I was just getting started! That guy didn’t know what hit him!”

He tried to get up again, to prove a point, but winced and fell back. Groaning, he commisterated, “...you know what, maybe a little break wouldn’t hurt. Yeah, just a breather…”

For a blissful, quiet moment, we just sat there, panting, blinking, hurting; just enjoying the brief moment of peace that was the hell of tonight. Peter pulled off his mask and I could finally see how much he was sweating under that thing. He dabbed at his face, cheeks as red as his suit. Our gazes met; Peter made a face, I gave a wan smile, and we both started to laugh a little; no joke shared, just a mutual feeling of shock and relief.

The moment ended when Tony Stark fell out of the sky.

I heard it before I saw it; A distant explosion, a flash of light; then the ground shaking, and the both of us looked up, startled, to see one of the massive cranes come crashing down to earth

Several suits tried to catch a falling figure, but failed.

“Oh, no, Mr. Stark!” Peter cried, and any previous notion of exhaustion was lost as he leapt to his feet and, before I could stop him, swung over to the wreckage.
“No, Peter wai —” It was too late, Peter well off at the site, and I was left, sprinting to catch up.

I still didn’t have my helmet. I could feel the blood, ash, and oil caking my face like a sticky second skin. Panic and fear caught up with me as Peter disappeared from sight, swallowed up by a growing column of smoke. I didn’t want to think of what we’d find there, beneath that creaking tower.

Coming up to the wreckage, I could hear sounds; voices, shouting. One sounded like Stark, and I had a brief moment of relief. He was still alive and, apparently, giving Peter orders.

“Peter!” I called but got only a faint reply. I still couldn’t see them; the smoke was too thick, and the rubble in my way wasn’t something I could just bash my way through. Long I-bars, walls of sheet metal, broken pipes of steam and other gases gushing all over the place. I ducked under a broken overhang and started weaving my way through, bringing a gloved hand to my face so I could breath a little through the choking smoke. The stench of burning rubber and oil was nearly overpowering, and I was blindly feeling my way around, trying not to cut myself on anything particularly sharp or hot. Oil spills helped spread the fire around and make it even more difficult to see.

I hadn’t seen Pepper, Rhodey, or the President at all by this point and hoped they were safe. There was no way for me to contact them, and I was too concerned for Peter to turn back now.

It stung my eyes and tears sprang down my cheeks. It was getting a little hard to see. Through the smoke I could see the flashing lights of broken machinery, the off-key whine of a busted siren fizzling out. I blinked furiously, squinting as I tripped over a piece of fallen catwalk, the metal grate catching against the laces of my boots. Note to future self: Velcro.

After about a minute of blindly wandering around, I could make out a clearing in the distance, the smoke thinning. I called again, “Peter, where are you?”

This time, I was met with a sudden commotion; shouting, a pop, then a crash, a new voice, deeper, too soft to make out. A cry that sounded like Peter.

The stroke of fear at his distress gave me a new burst of energy and I charged through the smoke. “Peter!”

The smoke dissipated. My foot caught on a piece of broken pipe I hadn’t seen and I stumbled through, catching myself on a ladder before my eyes finally came to rest on the scene before me.

Tony Stark, his leg caught under a piece of metal, trapped without any of his suit.

His eyes on Peter, suspended, writhing helplessly in the air as a burning red hand choked him.

“So is this your new pet, Stark? Bet you didn’t leave this one on the roof —” The hand, belonging to Aldrich Killian, his body reforming from the ashes, dragon tattoos snaking around his bare chest, pupils bright yellow and gloating to Tony.

Killian paused mid-sentence, startled by my entrance. But not for long.

He turned, appraised me for a second, then cast a vicious grin. “Come to watch the grand finale, Soldatka?”
Солдатка

art by me :)
“That’s what they called you, isn’t it?” Killian asked when I failed to respond. Peter choked in his grip.

“Mia!” Peter rasped, trying to pry Killian’s fingers away, feet kicking uselessly.

Heart pounding, ears ringing, I made to lunge forward.

“Ah-ah!” Killian raised a hand at me, chuckling as he tightened his grip around Peter’s neck. “I can snap his neck before you could even touch me.”

Every muscle in my body quaked, weight balanced tight on the balls of my feet. It was all I could to keep from disobeying.

“Good girl,” Killian smirked and my fingers twitched. The color in Peter’s face lightened as Killian dropped his hand, but didn’t let go of Peter. “Shame I didn’t get a chance to snag a bit more about you in the Crucible, otherwise this would be a very different situation. But since I have all your attention now, you’re going to watch helplessly as I string this little rat up.”

“Killian, no!” Stark struggled to get to his feet, but something was wrong with his leg. He was breathing hard, had no armor. He raised his hands pleadingly. “D-don’t hurt the kid!”

I watched, horrified, as Killian bent down, picked up a length of hanging cable and just — wrapped it around Peter’s neck, then grabbed the other end and pulled. Peter yelped, a broken cry as he shot upwards. Killian held our gazes to make sure we didn’t try anything — it was all completed in a few seconds, faster than I could’ve reached him.

“Peter!”

Something flickered out of the corner of my eye. I blinked, gaze shifting as a faint glowing form
appeared out of the smoke behind Killian and Stark.

The smoke was too thick to recognize them, but I knew that glow from anywhere. Extremis.

“This is what you get for picking the wrong start-up, Tony!” Killian snarled as Peter twisted helplessly, swinging in a way Spider-Man never should. My throat was dry, mouth like sandpaper. *If only I could get there in time —*

Killian went on about something, but I wasn’t listening. *Someone’s flanking us.*

“Killian, please, you can have me, just let him go —” the horror in Tony Stark’s face was almost too much to comprehend. He wasn’t even looking at Killian, just Peter, face growing paler and paler. “He’s just a kid!”

A stitch formed in my gut, but with Killian’s eyes on Tony, I edged closer, drawing out my shield. Movements slow, careful, so he wouldn’t pay attention. My eyes kept flicking between him and the glowing silhouette. Hitting only one meant I was putting either Tony or Peter’s life at risk. I needed to find the right angle to get both before they acted, before the flanker could figure out what I was doing. Surely they could see me, surely they knew I’d noticed them. I could see their eyes, pupils glowing like burning embers —

“Oh, yes, this I like,” Killian laughed, pulling back on the cable and lifting Peter a little higher. Killian just kept monologuing. “Tony Stark, the Merchant of Death, *begging* on his hands and knees! C’mon, Tony, let’s see you *try* and save someone’s life, just for once in your pathetic legacy.”

For a terrible split-second I hesitated, trying to figure out how to warn Tony without alerting Killian. The form was tall, female, and clearly in better shape than the injured Stark. She’d kill him before he’d even know she was there.

One arm was larger than the other, strangely misshapen. I frowned, squinting a little. It glowed, too, from the palm. Wait, was that —

For a moment, I was stunned. She nodded at me, just once.

Then I raised my chin to yell, “Stark!”

Then I threw my shield as hard as I could.

In hanging Peter, Killian had made a grave mistake. Instead of worrying about his hand, he gave up his leverage for a show of terror and strength. His reaction time meant nothing now when he wasn’t physically touching Peter. All I had to do was make him let go of the cable.

The shield hit Killian square in the chest.

Everyone had looked at me in surprise, which meant Killian didn’t see Pepper Potts stepped out of the smoke, raised her armored hand, and fired the repulsor at the cable.

Peter dropped like a sack of potatoes, sent sprawling to the ground in a coughing heap.

I didn’t know how far the shield would knock Killian, but I didn’t expect it to get stuck in his chest. Killian merely stumbled back, caught off guard. The cable went slack in his hand.

*Shit.* Not enough. Having seriously underestimated how hot and malleable Killian still was, his skin glowing and flaking black, constantly re-healing, any blows he took, his body would bend to absorb. That didn’t mean he still couldn’t hurt someone.
As Pepper rushed to drag Peter out of his direct vicinity, I lunged at Killian head on, finally intending to do what I had at the start.

He might have absorbed the shield a little, but he was still unprepared when I rushed in, ripped it out of his chest, leaving behind a narrow black cavity. I slammed the shield back across his face. Killian grunted, head snapping to the side.

There was no waiting, no hesitation. I wasn’t going to give Killian the chance to recover and fight back. Not after what he did to Peter.

It was like a dam breaking. All the wrenching, suffocating pain, the rage, the fear of watching Peter hang helplessly, the life draining out of him. The goddamn helplessness Killian made me feel. The helplessness I was never going to allow again.

Now I get to take it out on Killian.

It felt good.

I could feel the ghost of the Winter Soldier in my bones with every fist, every punch I landed. The clang of metal, not quite the same, still sent the same exhilarating chill into my veins.

The anger felt cold, not hot — my fingers went numb. My mind cleared. In the back of my mind, I had feared the rage might blind me.

But it did the exact opposite.

No, rather, it seemed to focus my strength, my desires, into a single, easy goal. I’d never felt so calm, so clear in my life.

If my hands burned, I didn’t feel it. Only the impact as I grabbed Killian’s shoulder and slammed my knee into his gut, then flipped him over my back. He managed to roll away from my heel about to meet his throat, just in time. Getting up, he got me by surprise by delivering a feint into my undefended right shoulder — I could smell cloth burning, but my skin felt utterly frozen.

Maybe my blood pressure dropped. That seemed unusual, especially considering how pissed off I was. But it was inconsequential. The only thing I cared about was stopping Killian.

Killing him.

I retaliated with a chop to the throat. Killian choked, gasped, stumbled back as the cartilage snapped beneath my fingertips, quickly reforming as he struggled to breathe. Again, I didn’t wait.

As he choked, like Peter did, I delivered a second punch to his abdomen to knock the rest of the air out of him, then elbow to his shoulder. It didn’t quite down him, so I broke his right leg backwards with a heel to his knee.

His bones sparked instead of cracked, but the effect was just as satisfying, if not as crunchy.

It was almost too easy. This? This was the Mandarin? This was who everyone was afraid of? He couldn’t even get his way past a simple Vibranium shield. Sure, his healing factor was frustrating, but I wondered how he made it so far when he couldn’t fight as well as his own soldiers.

...Well. Maybe that explained it. Killian valued his intelligence, his genius more than his ability to fight. And he could fight — but maybe complacency reliance on his own supposed invulnerability made him weak.
And the Crucible had no place for weakness.

“Wow,” Killian huffed as I flung him back out of a pit of flames, away from the oil drums he might’ve used to cause more mayhem. He wiped at his broken nose, blood bubbling like acid. “Look at what they did to you, sweetheart. Just think about it, you never would’ve made it this far without me. You never would’ve been this good if I hadn’t first provided the challenge.”

Normally I’d be afraid of Peter or the others overhearing this, but I had knocked Killian back behind some fallen rubble, into another smoky clearing where they were out of sight.

I sneered. “You never would’ve survived.” And shattered his jaw with my fist.

I wasn’t about to let him take credit for my own accomplishments.

In the back of my mind, I knew this fight was taking too long. I couldn’t find anything that would be able to take out Killian for good, and as energized and unstoppable as I felt right now, I knew my cold fury couldn’t carry me forever. Something had to give, and it wasn’t going to be me.

In the end, I didn’t have to worry about it.

Maybe a minute had passed. Maybe less, since I had first thrown my shield at Killian. And it was over just as quick.

“Mia!” I heard a voice call from behind me. Pepper Potts. “Duck!”

I looked just in time to see her kick a small missile at my face.

Seizing, I did as ordered and hit the deck — curling up behind my shield as the missile flew over my head and into Killian’s chest.

He had to be burning at over a thousand degrees.

The missile exploded instantly.

And just like that, the last burning reminder of the Crucible went up in smoke.

“Are you okay?” Pepper Potts rushed over to me, tottering a little as she tiptoed on bare feet through the rubble — looking a little ridiculous after that badass move she pulled a second earlier. After kicking a giant hunk of solid metal with her toes, I was sure her feet would be just fine. She seemed utterly frazzled, maybe in shock, after just watching what happened to Killian. “You two just disappeared into the smoke and I was afraid he might’ve hurt you! God, that was so much more explosive than I thought it would be…”

She took my arm and helped me up, making a face as she tried to dust off some soot with her glowing hand, but only achieved in making it worse. “Oh, oh no, I’m sorry, that’s such a nice coat, I didn’t mean to —”

I was a little dazed myself. It was over. It was finally over.

The fury, the rage, was gone. All that was left was a heavy head and limbs hanging like lead.

“Honey!” Stark’s voice rang out with a worried lilt. He came jogging, breathing hard out of the smoke. “C-can you not run off like that? Another one of the suits might attack you and I can’t — oh, god, did you kill him?”

He directed this last question at me, staring wide-eyed at the smoldering grease spot that was one
Aldrich Killian.

“Nope.” I just shook my head and pointed at Pepper.

I couldn’t tell if Tony Stark looked relieved or even more horrified.

He opened his mouth to say something else, but then I remembered — Peter — and took off without waiting to see what it was.

My accumulated injuries started to catch up with me as I raced back to where Peter was, jumping through a wall of smoke to the other side. My legs protested, my back ached, stiff and resisting anything more athletic than a hobble. But fear pounded anew in my heart, and nothing could stop me from scrambling back to Peter, who had been on the ground, half-dead, the last I’d seen him.

“Mav!” Shoulder killing me, face feeling like I got the worst sunburn in the world, I didn’t care for any of it as I rushed over to Pete, who was propped up against a metal pole, wheezing roughly as he struggled to catch his breath. Hands shaking a little, either from adrenaline or from hurting him more, I carefully pulled down his collar to observe the thick black bruises painting his throat. “Oh, god, Peter —”

“I’m f-fine, nothing broken,” Peter said, rubbing his throat and throwing me his best smile. It looked like it hurt. Seeing something like that, I considered it a miracle nothing broke. “Just minor oxygen deprivation. All I need is a breather and I’ll be — like five minutes, that’s all — and I can, we can go help —”

“Nuh-uh!” Tony Stark’s shout interrupted him, and we both looked up to see him limp over as imposingly as possible, waving a finger at us. Behind him followed Pepper, looking equally disapproving. “You two! Grounded! Forever!”

Peter and I exchanged glances. A new bruise was blooming across Peter’s throat, and I was sure the blast of hot ashes in my face gave me a new, gruesome set of freckles. Peter, who’d just been making the argument to get back into whatever battle may be left, just slumped back to the ground and sighed. After a long-ass car ride, dead bodies, and at least three different fights in one night alone, it was safe to say the both of us were just done. We looked back at Tony Stark, wide-eyed and silent.

He hesitated, brow furrowing. “...Y-you’re not going to argue with me this time?”

We shook our heads in unison.

“Oh, thank god,” Tony Stark breathed, shoulders dropping in relief. He ran a hand down his battered face. Blood smeared across his temple, the cut on his nose reopened. “I can’t do kids anymore. Sweetheart, remind me to never have any.”

Pepper snorted.

“M-Mr. Stark?” Peter stammered, and I helped him to his feet as he started to cough again. “C-can I ask you a favor?”

“What?” Tony crossed his arms. “If this is about fixing your little gadgets, no way, that’s on you —”

“A-actually,” Peter winced, making a face. “I was wondering if you could get us home. B-before morning. Aunt May’s gonna kill us if she learns we snuck out of the house.”

Tony Stark just blinked at us. Looked at Pepper, then back at us. Raised his finger. “N-”
“Yes, Tony,” Pepper chastised, giving him a hard look.

“What? No! I can’t fly them to New York!”

“It’s another ten hours till morning and you’re telling me that you can build a hundred different iron man suits in six months but can’t get a couple of kids a flight to Manhattan in one night?”

“It’s not about me, it’s about responsibility —”

“Oh, for God’s sake, it’s Christmas!”

Tony Stark inhaled sharply, nostrils flaring, and turned on us with blazing eyes. “Fine! One flight to New York City, coming up! But first, private chat with you, British Columbia!”

Now it was my turn to be mad. “It’s Rebel —”

“Don’t care! Cone of silence, over here!” Tony said, walking away and gesturing with his finger to follow.

Reluctantly, I did, leaving Pepper to help Peter. Sullen now, I hunched my shoulders as I stopped in front of Stark, behind a fallen sheet of corrugated metal, arms crossed and head down. This must be the talk he promised earlier. “What?”

“You know what.” Stark said, fixing me with an unimpressed look. His tone was softer, though, and I relaxed slightly when I realized he wasn’t going to yell at me. “You want you and the kid to go home? You and me gotta make a deal first.”

“A deal?” That wasn’t what I expected.

“Yeah, a deal, it’s a thing two adults make when they know they can’t agree on something but they gotta keep each other in line somehow,” Tony Stark explained like I was an idiot. He was probably doing it on purpose, so I had to stifle an angry retort, before he added, “Your dad and I make them all the time.”

Now I was really surprised, but was too afraid to show it. Struggling to maintain a straight expression, I glanced away. Where was he going with this? “You know I don’t actually know for sure —”

“I know, I know, we can all deal with that later,” Tony Stark waved his hands, scrunching up his nose and saying, “Just listen to me for a moment, okay? You want to go home, this is what I want from you…”

☆☆☆
Aunt May huffed up the steps, too hot in her coat and arms laden with bags. Last minute shopping, as it were, for dinner tonight. Turkey, stuffing, Yule log, the whole shebang. The kids were going to be *psyched*.

Maybe, just this once, she’d actually have leftovers.

Not that May was worried about that right now. Currently, she was cursing the building manager for the elevator that just had to malfunction today, at this hour, so early when she had been heading home. The bad storm overnight had caused extra delay, so it was now well into mid-morning by the time May had finished her shopping and made it home. God, she wasn’t sure she’d have any energy left between this and cooking to open any presents —

Boots clomping on the last steps of the landing, May slumped her bags to the floor for a moment, catching her breath. She had been worried, of course, about leaving the kids alone for such a long time, while they were grounded. On a *holiday*, no less.

They were good kids. May knew this. Peter had a good heart, and maybe Amelia got lost in her own head sometimes, but she was usually level-headed. May couldn’t imagine what kind of madness could convince these two to cause any trouble. They knew better.

They had to.

Right?

As May picked up her bags again, energy restored, she recalled the days of old, when she’d wake up to find Amelia and Peter’s tiny forms passed out on the couch, having fallen asleep in their attempt to catch Santa entering the living room. May and Ben would always wait until they’d fallen asleep to carefully sneak in and lay out the presents, toasting their milk and cookies. Then, they’d waking the kids up the next morning and tell the two it was Santa who had tucked them in with blankets, and that maybe next year they’ll catch him.

Worked every time.

May wanted to believe in those times again, in the innocence of their youth. She very much did, but she’d be lying to herself if Peter and Mia didn’t worry her, too. Worry too much, even. It wasn’t just that they got in trouble sometimes — it was the *type* of trouble. The type of trouble that could follow you for the rest of your life.

She hoped those days were over. For today, she hoped, everything would be fine. One perfect day, one perfect Christmas, was all that she asked.

If only she could go back to those days. Parenting seemed simpler, somehow. Now, every day, every step felt like a gamble. Was she somehow sabotaging their futures? When would it be too late to help them?

Shuffling to her door, May fumbled with her keys, and prayed silently that the apartment would at least be somewhat clean when she opened the door. That both kids would be in bed or — hell, at least still in the apartment where they were supposed to be. She didn’t want to spend the day angry or disappointed in them.

*A clean kitchen, please. That’s all I ask.*

With a small huff, Aunt May pushed open the door with her hip, calling out, “Kids, I’m home! And I’ve got —”
She cut herself off when she saw what awaited her inside.

The tree, sparkling.

The apartment, spotless.

The kitchen, untouched.

Golden sunlight streaming in across the living room floor, across the couch, where two lumps of blanket rested.

Amelia and Peter, snoring quietly with limbs strewn about, slightly overgrown on the too-small couch they shared. There were bags under their eyes, as if they’d been up the entire night.

Aunt May let out a soft sigh, her back falling against the door and shutting it. She closed her eyes, and after a long moment, chuckled under her breath.

Some things never changed.

Chapter End Notes

Fin.

If I could insert a credits song, it’d be: I’m America by Cilver - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UiO_VIGZBgw
"So, I was telling Ned, you know, how we got 'mugged,'" Peter made air quotes here as we headed
down the hall towards our door. In our arms were the groceries Aunt May asked us to get. "While
Christmas shopping, right, and all he wanted to talk about was Rebel Columbia in Miami! Can you
believe it?"

My response was barely-smothered laughter, which got me an elbow in the side. Peter complained,
"Hey, c'mon! It's not fair! You'd think he'd at least mention Spider-Man, but nooo, the cool new
superhero is way more important —"

Winter was in full swing at the start of the new year, and despite how bundled up Peter was, I could
still see the bruises on his neck — starting to fade into yellow and green, finally. By the time Spring
Semester started, they'd be all but gone.

"Hmm, sounds like someone's jelly," I smirked we stopped in front of our door and I fumbled with
the knob.

"Am not!"

I myself was doing better. The bruises and burns had faded, although I had a sinking feeling I might
end up with those black-cinder freckles forever. At least my hair was starting to grow out again, just
skimming my shoulders. Nowhere near close to its original length a few years ago, but maybe
someday.

Being grounded, not so much — I wasn't leaving the house beyond chores until my coming birthday.
But I didn't mind; I had no reason to sneak out now.

As I argued with Peter, I opened the door, and caught a snippet of conversation. Aunt May and a
low male tone I didn't recognize. I went quiet, throwing Peter an odd look, the door paused half-way.
"Did Aunt May say she was having anyone over?"

Peter just gave me a bewildered shrug.

Before I could posit an idea, Aunt May called, "Hey, kids! I'm glad you're back. And Mia, there's
someone here I want you to meet."

Peter's eyebrows shot up, and we exchanged another look. Why me in particular? Ears twinging, I
pushed the door all the way open and stepped inside.
Aunt May was sitting at the couch, her arm slung over the side as she smiled at us entering. From her expression, I assumed I wasn't in trouble this time.

Next to her, on the armchair sat a man I didn't recognize. Blond and broad-shouldered, I could already tell he was big before he stood up to face us. At first glance, the man seemed completely normal. Late twenties, early thirties. Clean-shaven face and worn jeans.

My heart skipped a beat. He seemed at ease, but the way he carried himself spoke only of a super soldier.

I'd never seen his face without his mask on, but I knew immediately who this man was.

"Mia, Peter," Aunt May stood as well, gesturing to this giant of a man as he sidled awkwardly around the couch and coffee table, hands stuck in his pockets. "I'd like you to meet Mr. Rogers."

"Oh, no, please," the man chuckled, bowing his head in embarrassment. He waved a hand, saying, "Steve is just fine."

I was well aware of the consequences of Tony Stark's deal, but I didn't think they'd come knocking so soon. Oh god. I wasn't ready. I wasn't ready.

Mr. Rogers — no, Steve, approached us. Me. His eyes met mine and I froze, unable to read his face. A little dazed, I blinked up at his height, wondering if now was a good time to panic. What was he thinking? What did I look like to him? Why was he here?

"Amelia, right?" Steve Rogers smiled. It wasn't confident or self-assured — rather, uncertain, like he was testing my name, testing the truth of it. But somehow kind at the same time.

He offered me his hand. "It seems like you and I have a lot of catching up to do."

Rebel Columbia will return.
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!