The Way They Happen

by 26stars

Summary

Melinda May has been living life out of order for years, falling out of the present and into the past and back again against her will. She has never once been able to change anything that happens. She has never seen anything good come from it.

That is, until the day her SHIELD team picks up a hacker who looks at her with starry eyes and says she's known May her whole life.

Time Traveler's Wife AU
This is an AU inspired by the story the book by Audrey Niffenegger--the idea belongs to her. Quoted dialogue belongs to their respective episode writers. All AoS characters belong to Marvel.

And now for a story...
September 27, 1974—Melinda is 5 and 38

Melinda May likes this house best. At age five, she’s already lived in three houses in three states, one of the perks (pains) of having a military parent. Her father’s re-stationing had come at a good time—she was able to settle into her new home well before it was time for her to start kindergarten in the fall. The three of them have only been in this house for four months, which should be long enough for the season to change at least once, but this is Florida, and around here, summer feels endless.

She mostly likes this house because of the backyard. Their last home, the only other one she remembers, was a condo, so the concept of a private area to play outdoors was new to her when they moved in to this house. In the past, there had been a nearby common area with a playground and picnic tables, but with a fenced-in yard, she can play by herself without her parents’ supervision, and it’s a space big enough for her to turn five cartwheels before she hits the back fence. Best of all, though, is the tree-house in the oak in the corner, built by some past residents and left for future adventurers. Her mother and father have strictly forbidden her from climbing without one of them standing below her to catch her if she falls. But today is Saturday, her mother is at the store, her father when is napping, and she wants up.

She wants to test out her parachute.

It’s not that high, she thinks as she stands at the bottom of the trail of nailed-in rungs leading up the trunk of the tree. But it should be high enough to find out if this works.

She looks at her parachute, a concoction of a bed sheet and shoestrings and one of her father’s belts that she has strapped around herself and stuffed into her backpack for the climb. It looks like the one she studied from her Howling Commandos comic. Should work the same.

It only didn’t work while jumping off your bed earlier because it wasn’t high enough. This height should do the trick.

She takes a deep breath, looks up again, and starts to climb.

"Mei Qiaolian."

The sound of her Chinese name in her mother's voice makes her freeze instantly, one foot still on the ground. She steps down quickly and turns slowly toward the back door, where she's expecting to see her mother standing with a scowl, having caught her in the act.

But the door is closed. There's no one there.

“Mama?” Melinda calls, confused, looking around the empty backyard and taking a step away from the tree.

“Mellie.”

She hears another one of her names, this time coming from behind her. She turns and sees a hand waving from behind the wide tree trunk, low to the ground. Her mother’s voice is quieter now but more insistent.
“Mellie, come here.”

Extremely confused, Melinda takes a few steps forward, wondering just how her mother hid back there without her noticing.

But it’s not her mother, she realizes immediately as she rounds the trunk. It is a woman, a stranger, someone with long, black hair sitting on the ground with her legs tucked up against her chest.

And she’s not wearing any clothes.

“Hi, Mellie,” the woman says with a warm smile, looking very glad to see her. She switches languages and begins speaking Chinese. “Don’t worry. I know I surprised you, but I came here because I need your help.”

Melinda is frozen, staring at the woman who looks and sounds like her mother but is older and her hair’s too long...

“Who are you?” she asks, her hands tightening around her backpack straps. “And why are you in our backyard?”

The woman seems unsurprised by the question. “I’ll tell you, but I need you to do something for me first. You see, I lost my clothes,” she looks down at herself with an embarrassed shrug, “so can I borrow your parachute to cover myself with?”

Even more surprised that she knows what’s in her backpack, Melinda slowly slides the straps off her shoulders.

Mama said not to take things from strangers…but she never said you couldn’t give them things.

She slowly holds the backpack out to the woman, who unzips it immediately and shakes out the parachute before wrapping it around herself like a blanket.

“Thank you, Meimei, this is very helpful,” she says as she settles back against the tree trunk. “I can tell you’ve worked hard on this, so thank you for letting me use it.”

“Who are you?” Melinda repeats, and the woman meets her eyes. She looks a little uncomfortable as she answers slowly.

“I’m a member of your family. You can call me Jiejie.”

Big sister. Maybe a cousin you’ve never met before?

But this doesn’t seem quite right.

“Why are you back here? Does Mama know you’re here?”

“No she doesn’t actually, so please don’t tell her that I was here,” the woman says quickly, glancing towards the house. “I came here a special way just to see you, Meimei.”

“Why are you here to see me?” Melinda asks slowly, taking a half-step back.

The woman looks up at the tree-house. “I think I’m here to try to stop you from jumping out of this tree. That’s what you wanted to do, isn’t it?” she asks, looking back down at Melinda. “You want to give this parachute a try?”

Pleased, Melinda nods eagerly. “Yeah, it looks like the Howling Commandos.”
“It does.” The woman nods gamely. “But it won’t work the same. And if you jump out of the tree with it, all you’re going to do is fall and hurt your wrist and your leg very badly.”

Extremely insulted, Melinda almost snatches her parachute back. She looks at her project and sees a few red smudges on the fabric where the woman has touched it, and then notices that the woman is pressing a handful of material against the side of her leg. Red is seeping across the sky-blue fabric.

“Are you hurt?” she asks, forgetting her frustration immediately.

The woman looks down and tries to better conceal the reddened fabric in her hand. “I got hurt a few days ago, but I think I hurt it again while I was traveling.”

Melinda steps closer. “Should I go get you--”

“No, stay here, Melinda,” the woman says quickly, “I need you to see something.”

Melinda takes another step closer. The woman seems to be breathing differently. Her eyes are darting around quickly until seems to focus and she trains them on Melinda.

“You’re going to see me again in a few years, Meimei,” the woman says seriously, pulling a marker from Melinda’s backpack and scribbling a date and an address on the bed sheet. She’s talking very fast now, as though she’s running out of time. “March 7, 1978. And until then, I need you to keep me a secret. I know when I’m coming again because I’m a time traveler. I know because I’m you, Melinda. You from the future. Here’s how you’ll know I’m telling the truth: you’ll be living in a blue house in a place called Abilene at this address by then, and you’re going to have a cast on your arm. I’ll tell you more when I see you again.”

Melinda has too many questions to choose one, but all she manages is, “Why--”

The woman suddenly tips forward, her free hand reaching out and brushing Melinda’s arm, a surprisingly solid impact. “Don’t jump,” the woman whispers urgently as she looks up and meets her eyes.

But then there’s a sound like a hand covering the end of a vacuum hose, and the parachute is floating to the ground empty.

Melinda stands there for a moment, waiting for the woman to reappear, turning the sheet inside out to make sure she’s not hiding. Eventually, she walks around the backyard.

"Jieji?" she calls softly. "Jie?"

She ducks quietly back into the house to make sure she’s not hiding in there, but there is no trace of the woman inside either. Completely befuddled, Melinda tramps back into the yard and picks up her parachute. There is blood smeared across it in several places, still wet when she touches it.

She was really here.

And now she’s really gone.

Because she said she…time-travelled?

For a while, she sits there contemplating the blood, the parachute, the date and address scribbled on the corner, and the words of the visitor.

“I’m a time traveler,” the woman had said. “I’m you.”
But that doesn’t make sense.

*She can’t be me because I’m five, and I’m still here. I’ll just have to wait and ask her to explain when I see her again.*

Melinda stares at the date in the corner, the jumble of letters and numbers that she’s just now learning how to read. She thinks about hiding the evidence under her bed to save for later.

Save for the next three years, it would seem.

But not without testing her project first.

*She said it wouldn’t work, but what does she know?* Melinda thinks as she stuffs the sheet back into the backpack and starts to climb the tree. *If she’s really a time-traveller, I bet she’s never needed to make a parachute before.*

She’s reached the top. She buckles the belt around herself and grips the shoestring harness with both hands. She looks forward into the blue and jumps.

And then she screams.

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_June 8, 2008—Melinda is 38_

Melinda opens her eyes slowly, pressing her palms against the cold tiles beneath her, trying to push equilibrium back into the world. She's in her bathroom again, the one on the second floor of the house she and Andrew moved into after they got married two years ago. The room is dark, but she can make out her nightgown in a crumpled heap on the bathroom floor, right where she was doubled over before she disappeared. Her leg is still bleeding, and she cups her hand carefully around the wound, wondering how likely it is to heal if she insists against the doctor putting in stitches again. Fumbling for the drawer in the counter beside her, she finds a pile of cotton squares and presses them against the hole in her calf, forcing herself to breathe slowly and not flinch away from the added pain.

"Melinda?" she hears Andrew's soft voice threading through the darkness from the direction of their bedroom.

She doesn't reply or look up from her wound, but after a moment she sees the bathroom light come on above her.

"Melinda?" Andrew repeats, crossing the room to kneel by her side. His hand touches her bare shoulder gently. "Did you just travel again?" he whispers.

She raises her head, blinking against the brightness as her curtain of hair falls away, and looks over at him.

"I felt it coming but I couldn't stop it."

His gaze is somber, apologetic.

"I know. I'm just sorry."

He looks at the bloody cotton she's holding against her leg and stands, going to the medicine cabinet and pulling out a bottle of saline, a package of gauze, and a bandage roll.
"How long were you gone?" he asks, returning to her side. "How long have you been bleeding?"

She pulls the cotton away and lets him pour the liquid over it, forcing herself to only breathe deeply in response to the dull sting as he dabs away at the liquid because she knows this hurts him as much as her.

"Only a few minutes, I think," she tells him as he presses a square of gauze over the wound, placing the end of the bandage over it and beginning to wrap it gently around her leg.

"Where did you go?" he asks softly.

She stares at the ceiling and remembers staring up at a tree-house.

"The house I lived in in Tampa."

"Were you there this time too?" he asks, looking up at her. "Younger you?"

She thinks of a parachute and skeptical eyes and a complete unwillingness to believe what she was hearing until she saw it. It’s a memory she has from both sides now.

"Yes. I was five."

She looks down at her other knee and sees the faded scar stretched across it from her fall from the tree thirty years ago, the one she somehow knew would still be there when she reemerged in her own present time. She wonders if the little girl with a parachute is crying in her father's arms on the way to the hospital now.

No, she corrects herself, you were crying in his arms thirty years ago. That girl is now sitting on her bathroom floor with her husband.

There is no parallel universe. There is just you.

She tries for the millionth time to figure out how this is possible, how her thirty-eight-year-old self could slip so easily into the past and back, how time is no longer a horizontal line but now a jumbled pileup of events that she seems to drop into and out of at different junctions, like wires crossed back on themselves again and again...

Andrew has finished wrapping her other leg. He reaches for her nightgown, puddled on the ground beside her. She hears the clink of her wedding ring tumbling out onto the tiles, right next to a few bloody pieces of catgut that were previously holding the healing parts of her leg together. He hands her the ring and then helps her pull the nightgown over her head, his hands sliding gently over her skin. The world has stopped spinning by then, but Melinda doesn't fight it when Andrew slips an arm beneath her knees and the other around her back, standing easily with her in his arms and carrying her out of the bathroom and back to their bed.

She catches a glimpse of the clock on her nightstand. 4:17 am. She doubts she will fall back asleep, but she lets him lay her down anyway, elevating her injured leg on two pillows and laying the covers carefully over her.

In the half-dark, Andrew touches her hand. "Pain level?"

A second voice fills her mind. Give me your pain...
She jerks her hand out from beneath his. Even in the dimness, she sees the hurt flicker over his features.

"I'm fine," she says heavily, turning her head away and closing her eyes.

She hears him set a bottle of painkillers on her nightstand, then go to the bathroom to flip off the light. When he returns to his side of the bed and slides in beside her, she feels him turn toward her, but he doesn't touch her.

She knows he wants to say something comforting but doesn't know what to say, so she gives him the easiest out and lies still, stretching out her breathing and faking sleep until she hears his breathing stretch out too, falling into the rhythmic, deep gusting of sleep. She doesn't feel bad about this.

*There's no way to talk about it when neither of you has the vocabulary for it.*

Beneath the blankets, Melinda wraps her other hand around her left wrist, the one that will always dislocate easier than the other, all because a five-year-old's self-assured invincibility sent her jumping out of a tree despite a stern, certain warning...

*You told her not to jump, and that was the insult that made sure she did it--made sure you did it. Things only happen one way--the way they happen.*

She lies there and tries to remember those five-year-old feelings of confusion and skepticism, how it had felt to look at a woman who looked more like her mother than like herself, to see the sincerity but to still doubt that this woman was telling the truth about anything, to realize only after she crashed to the ground and her knee and wrist split with pain that the woman might have been telling her something worth hearing.

She thinks of the list she kept throughout her childhood of the seemingly random visits from her future self, a list that she decided when she was 15 that she had better burn and simply commit to memory...She knows that her childhood self won't--*didn't*--see her adult self again until she is 8, that she had--*will have*--convinced herself by then that this might have been a dream, a child's pretend play that she had concocted and repeated until she was convinced of its truth...it was only when her adult self tumbled into her next childhood bedroom in another new city that she finally admitted to herself that this was probably real and *really, really* strange...

She had spent thirty years wondering what would happen that would cause her to time travel.

She never could have guessed it would be a mission in Bahrain.

**Chapter End Notes**

Jiejie (姐姐) and Meimei (妹妹) are Chinese words for 'big sister' and 'little sister', respectively. "Jiejie" can also refer to a woman in your generation who is older than you (friends and cousins included). "Meimei" is a very familiar term for any woman/girl who is younger than you.
November 13, 1980—Melinda is 11 and 43

It’s nine thirty-eight in the evening, and Melinda is still waiting for Melinda.

At the end of her last visit a few months ago, the woman had given her the next date and time to expect her: November 13, sometime after dinner, in the living room. All throughout dinner, Melinda had been too nervous to eat, listening around her mother's scolding, her ear craned towards the living room waiting for any sound that would signal her future self's arrival.

The visits from Jiejie over the years have included some close calls with Mom, Dad, and neighbors, but the secret has been, so far, remarkably well-kept, and Melinda intends to continue the streak. Tonight’s going to be a challenge, though. She knows how bad this could be. After dinner, her father always watches M*A*S*H* and then the 9 o'clock news while her mother sits nearby and reads. Melinda is allowed to watch with him if her homework’s done, as long as she showers and goes to bed at 9:00.

But tonight, she’s sitting silently behind the sofa, lurking just out of her mother's view, fiddling with the blanket she's clutching and trying to concoct an explanation that someone will believe for when a naked woman appears out of thin air.

She still hasn’t come up with something.

The half-hour news broadcast is over, but her father still hasn't left the sofa. Melinda hears her mother get up and turn the television off. Without the noise, she can hear her dad snoring.

Fantastic.

Suddenly, there’s a sound of a trashcan outside tipping over. The neighbor’s dog begins to bark.

Oh no.

"Wen, did you hear that?"

Her father doesn't reply. Melinda hears her mother reach over and thump him with her book. He wakes with a loud snort.

"Wen! There's something in the backyard."

Her father stands up quickly, moving towards the kitchen where the back door is. Melinda's hands tighten around the blanket as she watches him flip on the porch lights look out the window. Her breath is frozen in her lungs.

No. No. No.

She said family room, not backyard!

“Melinda, what are you doing out of bed?!”

She had not even heard her mother move. Now, her head snaps up and she sees the woman is standing right over her, her hands on her hips.

“Do you have something to say for yourself?”
Melinda looks up at her but can't speak, can't come up with anything...

“Go back to bed right now!” Her mother does not need to raise her voice to leave no room for argument.

Melinda moves quickly, scrambling to her feet and dashing down the short hallway to her bedroom until she can sneak back later. She pauses at the doorway, glancing nervously back towards the living room, but all she can see is her mother standing at the mouth of the hall, watching her go back in. Melinda ducks her head and bows through the door.

She shuts it behind her and starts to count to one hundred, listening to her mother moving across the creaking living room floorboards towards the kitchen and saying something to her father. Melinda gets to seven before she hears a voice behind her that makes her jump.

"Mei Qiaolian."

She spins and sees Jiejie sitting on the bed, wrapped in her mother’s bathrobe and almost smiling.

Indignant, Melinda stomps towards her. “You said you were going to be in the living room!” she hisses, waving her arm at the door. “I was waiting out there for you!”

The woman is nodding, unruffled. “I know,” she says, not whispering. “You were distracting Mom and Dad while I appeared in their bathroom. So good job.”

“Keep your voice down,” Melinda whispers back harshly. “They’re still awake!”

But the woman is standing up and flipping on the lamp, filling the room with gold light. Her volume is still normal as she responds, “It’s okay, Meimei. This is the night that it happens.”

Melinda cocks her head. “The night what happens?”

Just then, Melinda hears her mother’s voice on the other side of the door. “Melinda, why is your light on? And who are you—”

She can’t get to the door in time.

There is no in-between—the door is closed and then the door is open, and her (their?) mother is standing there seeing both of them, the older woman not even trying to hide.

Her mother’s shock lasts just long enough for Melinda to instinctively step in between the two women, her arms spreading to hide the impossible-to-miss evidence, but just before her mom starts shouting, she feels Jiejie put a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“This,” she hears the woman whisper. And then the mayhem begins.

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**August 18, 2013—Melinda is 43 and 44**

Melinda is pretty sure she disappeared from her bed, but she finds herself reappearing on the kitchen floor of her apartment, the linoleum cold against her skin, piled shadows the only thing covering her body.

*Another incomplete circle,* she thinks as she starts to pull herself to her feet, using the counter for support. *The least the universe could do is put me back where it found me...*

As she stands, she sees a jar of tea leaves on the counter and the kettle on the stove, and she stiffens.
“Those were definitely put away when I went to bed…”

“Hey, it’s just me,” a voice says from the direction of her sofa.

Melinda spins and sees another Melinda sitting on the small loveseat, wrapped in a throw blanket and holding a cup of tea, which she raises in a silent salute.

“I saw the bed was empty,” the woman says, not moving from where she’s curled up. “Where did you go?”

A quick glance at the clock on the microwave tells Melinda that it’s close enough to dawn that she may as well not go back to bed. Sighing heavily, she moves towards the bathroom and takes her robe off the back of the door. “The house in Oklahoma City,” she answers, tying the garment around herself as she returns to the kitchen. The water in the kettle is still hot, so she begins preparing herself her own tea.

The other Melinda huffs out a suggestion of a laugh. “The living room incident?”

Melinda nods, remembering. “It was almost worse from the other side of things, having to be the one to convince Mom and Dad that I wasn’t some perverted stalker turning up naked in their child’s room. I was just counting down the seconds until I disappeared and left them with evidence that would end the argument.”

Her tea ready, she moves around the counter towards the small living room. “How long have you been here?” she asks herself.

The other Melinda reaches over and flicks on the lamp. Gold light spills through the room, a preemptive dawn. “Less than an hour.”

Melinda sinks into the other corner of the sofa, pulling her knees to her chest and resting her mug on her knees as she examines her visiting self. The other woman looks the same, only an extra inch of length in her hair to suggest any age difference between them.

“So. Big week, huh?” the other woman asks, nodding at the TAHITI file on the coffee table.

Melinda nods. “Coulson’s only been back for two weeks, and he’s already got his science team and Specialist. He’s supposed to come ask me to pilot tomorrow, and Fury wants us airborne by the end of the week.”

The woman’s nodding like she remembers. “Yeah. We sure have his number, don’t we? You think you’re ready?”

Melinda looks away. “Well, I just time-traveled, so…”

She sips her tea and avoids looking at the other woman, who waits like she knows she'll say more. Melinda sighs and stares down at her mug, watching the rehydrated leaves slowly settle to the bottom.

“I just...I still can’t believe we’ve managed to keep it a secret this long. The tai chi helps a lot--I haven’t traveled during the day in over a year. But I still can’t do anything about the nightmares. I’ve traveled more in the last three months than the past two years combined.” She looks over at her other self. “And if you’re coming from the future, then that doesn’t really comfort me. How are we going to get away with this in such close quarters with a team?”

“I’m here from November,” the woman says coolly. “And guess what? We’re doing all right so far.”
Melinda lets the surprise show on her face. Her visitors from the future are rarely so forthcoming.

“It’s going to be fine, Melinda,” the woman says tiredly, settling her head back against the sofa. “You’ll learn like you always do--by trial and error--and you’re going to make it work.”

“Does combat bring it out?” Melinda asks urgently, deciding that she may as well ask as long as her luck lasts.

The woman shakes her head. “It hasn’t brought it out yet. No one new has seen anything out of the ordinary with you.”

“Okay.” Melinda breathes disbelievingly. One of the many knots in her stomach loosens a little. “That’s good.” She manages a shaky smile. “How is it then? The plane, the team?”

The other woman seems to hit a wall, her brow furrowing like she wants to answer but can’t make the words come out. Eventually, she sighs and looks down into her mug. “You’ll be there soon enough. Gonna just have to wait.”

“Is Coulson still stable?” Melinda asks, already knowing this is far too specific for any visitor to tell her.

The woman is clearly searching for a way to word her answer. “There's a lot that you can't prepare for, but I've done my best. I've done my job,” she says slowly.

Melinda instantly feels sick. “Our job is to keep him in the dark and order him put down if he loses it,” she reminds the woman, her fingers tightening around the scalding ceramic in her hands.

“I’ve done half my job then,” the woman corrects herself, meeting her eyes.

Melinda’s grip relaxes slightly. “Okay.”

A quiet moment passes. The other Melinda drains her cup and sets it on the coffee table next to the file that is full of secrets they will have to keep.

“It's going to be fine, Melinda,” she says again, picking up the folder and flipping it open on her lap. "But you don't need anyone to sell it to you, anyway. You know you're ready. And ready to be you again.”

Melinda cocks her head. “I wasn’t thinking about myself when I made the recommendations to Fury or agreed to his orders,” she says defensively.

“Yes, you were,” the other woman says without looking up from the photos of the alien host, the coroner’s documents. “It may have been in the smallest way, but you know you've had enough office life. You’re ready to get out in the weirder world again. Don’t feel bad about that.”

“I'm not—“

But suddenly the other Melinda sucks in a sharp breath, her body going rigid. The file falls to the edge of the cushion and tips onto the floor, spilling its contents across the rug. The blanket wilts onto the sofa, empty.

Melinda is alone again.

She stays on the sofa for a moment longer, looking around at the tiny space that she’s relegated herself to ever since her divorce.
I'm not doing this for me, she tells herself forcefully. Everything that's about to happen is for him. For SHIELD.

Same thing.

She finishes her tea. She picks up the papers. And then she goes to her bedroom and begins to pack.
First Meeting, Two

August 21, 2013: Melinda is 43, Skye is 23

It’s only day one, and a lot can still go wrong, so Melinda actively holds herself back from thinking *So far so good.* But considering that their departure date was abruptly moved up when the Rising Tide beat SHIELD to the discovery and broadcasting of an unregistered Gifted, it hasn’t been too terrible of a start to things.

They’ve been on the ground for a couple of hours already, and she’s only checked the security feeds once to see how the interrogation of the Rising Tide hacker is going.

*Young,* she thought when she saw the girl staring down Grant Ward with a smirk on her face. *Too young to be in this much trouble with SHIELD.*

The girl barely looked old enough to drink, let alone hack a top-security agency. Certainly not what Melinda had expected their first mission to look like.

While Coulson and Ward continue their good cop/bad cop routine in the Cage, Melinda’s been taking advantage of the pause to start stowing her “contingency plans” throughout the plane—two in the cockpit, one in Coulson’s office (you never know…), three tucked in various inconspicuous crevices throughout the cabin level, one in the SUV, and now she’s stowing her last one in an unused corner of a storage closet in the cargo level.

She doesn’t plan to need this many, but if she had her way, she wouldn’t need them at all.

“Agent May?” she hears Coulson’s voice calling down the metal staircase at the end of the hall. “Mission conference at the holocom, right now.”

*Guess the hacker had something worth knowing.*

May quickly finishes rearranging stacks of toilet paper to hide her tiny bundle on the shelf before slipping out of the closet and making her way to the stairs. Coulson is waiting for her at the top.

“Ready to dive into the weirder world again?” he asks with a little too much eagerness, but May doesn’t reply as she falls into step beside him.

As they approach the electronic conference table in the center of the cabin, she sees the dark-haired prisoner walking around with her hands uncuffed and Agent Ward nowhere in sight.

“Did you trade our Specialist for her intel?” she asks, throwing Coulson a scathing look.

“Well, I let her think I gave Ward a truth serum,” her friend says with a subtle smile. “Don’t worry. He should be coming around before too long.”

She follows him into the conference room where the girl is leaning against the holocom near Fitz and Simmons, watching with an amused expression as the scientists chatter at a million miles an hour.

"Skye," Coulson says as they enter, and the girl's head turns. “This is Agent May. She’s the pilot. Agent May, this is Skye.”

The so-called Skye had glanced up with a lingering smile when Coulson first said her name, but as soon as he said May's name and the girl's dark eyes had turned towards her, Skye's face had frozen,
eyes widening, mouth going slack.

Melinda knows that look. She hates that look.

_This girl has met you before._

Melinda stares back and scrolls back through her memories, scanning them for the presence of the face in front of her, but comes up empty. She is certain she doesn't know the girl yet.

_Great, just what this situation needed..._

The girl is scrambling, trying to pull up an innocent and blank face over her shock, and Melinda wonders if this means that Skye knows the nature of her secret and is trying to hide her reaction for Coulson's benefit.

_Joke’s on you--he already knows._

As Coulson takes his place at the table and begins to explain to all of them what problem they have to fix—a down-on-his-luck dad named Mike Petersen who surely never asked to be in this Centipede mess—May can feel the girl staring at her, shifting anxiously on her feet as Coulson talks. She trains her own eyes on the screen and watches security footage that is too corrupted for clues until the girl seems to suddenly remember that she’s allowed to contribute.

“What if you had the audio?”

Fitz and Simmons quickly jump on that, and the girl says she has it in her van.

“Your van’s here,” Coulson says, “but we couldn’t decrypt the files.”

_Well, that’s impressive,_ May has to admit, hiding a twitch in her brow and not looking at the girl.

“The encryption’s coupled to my GPS,” the girl says, and May feels her gaze drifting back towards her. “Get my van back to the alley and we’re in business.”

Coulson doesn’t miss the direction of the girl’s gaze.

"Agent May will escort you," he says, and Melinda shoots him a withering look. He only shrugs.

_You’re just here to drive, remember?_

He tosses her a set of keys, and Melinda immediately moves towards the door, letting the girl fall into step behind her.

“And on your way out,” Coulson pauses her, “wake up Ward.”

As they walk through the cabin towards the vehicle bay below, Melinda can feel the girl now staring openly at her back. She doesn’t say anything as she unlocks the girl’s car and climbs into the driver’s seat without asking for her permission, firing up the engine before the kid has even got the passenger-side door open. She waits until the van is down the ramp, off the airfield, and a mile down the highway before pulling the car onto the shoulder and turning towards the girl, whose surprised face is caught in the orange slant of a streetlight.

"We've met before?"

The young woman seems startled but nods immediately, a faucet primed to spill.
"Sorry, I know I was staring..." she stammers breathlessly. "You told me that when we finally met in your present, you wouldn't know me or even recognize me. You warned me that it would go just like this...I just..." The girl trails off, her face breaking into a relaxed smile. "Everything makes sense now."

"When did you meet me?" Melinda asks, analyzing every twitch and tell in the girl's face, trying to get ahead of her. Of all the things to hate about time travel, this might be the most constant frustration—the feeling that she is constantly catching up to everyone else.

"The first time?" the girl clarifies, and Melinda nods. "I was four. It was 1994."

"Where were you?" Melinda presses, trying to think of situations she's traveled to where there were children besides her younger self present. There aren't many apart from Bahrain.

"Des Moines," the girl answers, still staring at her with a mix of joy and wonder. May stares back and forces her features to remain solidly blank. Behind her gaze, her mind is racing.

Why is this girl important enough that you're going to visit her childhood?

Who is she?

What will she become?

"I know, I know, I'm sorry," the girl is saying, reaching towards Melinda’s hand. "It hasn't happened for you yet..."

Melinda jerks away from the girl’s hand with enough force that her elbow slams loudly into the car door behind it. "What do you know about me?" she snaps, drilling into the girl’s eyes with her own. Skye is visibly startled by the force in May's voice, the barest trace of hurt flickering across her features as she pulls her hand back, wrapping it around her own elbow as she answers. "I know that your name is May and you're chrono-displaced, meaning that you randomly time travel without your will to other times and places. Sometimes you go years away, sometimes months, sometimes days, usually after or during high-stress situations. I know that the traveling didn't start until you were an adult, when something bad happened to you. I knew you had a dangerous job where you got hurt a lot, but I never could have guessed SHIELD."

May stares at the girl, feeling like her insides are slowly freezing over.

"I also know," Skye goes on, now smiling again, "that you hate coffee, and you’re a terrible cook. I know you’ve been married before but you aren’t anymore. I know that you have a scar on your left knee from where you fell out of a tree when you were five and that you got shot through the other leg when the Bad Thing happened. I know that you--"

"Enough," Melinda cuts her off harshly, turning away and throwing the van back into gear, swinging them back onto the road and stomping on the gas.

She feels the girl watching her, the pain clear in her expression, but May doesn't have time to worry about how this makes the girl feel.

She knows more than she should. Way, way more.

She takes a steadying breath and keeps her eyes on the road as she speaks.

"Look, kid, whoever you are, whoever you will be, it doesn't matter right now. At this moment, I
don't know you, and you're a prisoner of my organization. Whatever makes you so damn important to me hasn't happened to me yet, so right now the only thing keeping me from dropping you on the side of the road is the fact that my superior ordered me to bring you back without letting you out of my sight."

"Does your superior know that you time travel?" the girl asks, sounding sincerely concerned.

"Of course he does," May says, "but the others don't, and you won't be telling them. Not one word."

She throws her scariest glare towards the passenger seat, but the girl meets it, staring back fearlessly, indignantly.

"I've kept your secret my whole damn life," she says quietly, heavily. "I can keep it a little longer...Agent May."

Skye turns away and folds her arms over her chest, staring through the windshield. The next few minutes pass in silence, but a dangling phrase niggles at the back of May’s mind.

She said she first saw you nearly twenty years ago. There’s no way a four-year-old would remember your face, or all of those details.

She doesn't look at the girl as she asks, "How many times in your life have you seen me?"

For a suspended moment as Skye looks over at her, Melinda lets herself hope for the answer she wants.

Say ‘Once’, she pleads with whatever force of nature is listening. For just once, let this be easy.

But then Skye turns away and passes her hand quickly across her cheek. The streetlights filing above them still glint off the damp lines on her skin as she answers.

"Twenty-eight times."

The words land heavily.

Then she adds, barely more than a whisper, “I've known you my whole life."

May's hands tighten on the steering wheel, and she forces herself to breathe slowly and intentionally, counting the white lines on the highway and methodically forcing her heart rate down.

You cannot time-travel from behind the wheel.

In the corner of her eye, she sees the girl wipe her eyes again, her throat working to swallow down her pain. Internally, Melinda sighs. She would apologize if she had done something wrong, but there’s nothing she can do about this situation.

If this girl wants to take her complaint up with the universe, she can just take a number.

She says nothing for the rest of the drive, thinking only of ways to ensure that this girl does not get back on their plane.

August 22, 2013: Skye is 23, May is 43

May is here.
Skye’s brain hasn’t stopped replaying this simple fact.  

This is May's present day, and her present day, and May is here.  

Fully clothed, in her own time and place, an agent of SHIELD in all her glory.  

*SHIELD.*  

*SHIELD.*  

*SHIELD.*  

She’s *SHIELD.* Of course of course of course.  

*It all makes sense.*  

There are a million questions she wants to ask, so many things she’s ready to know, but Skye can tell that keeping silent is the smartest option right now. The woman driving her van is visibly tense, and even though Skye has seen her worse, she knows what kind of control May has over her expressions. For the anxiety to be so visible, Skye knows that this situation is bad for her.  

Really bad.  

*She told you to go easy on her when this day came. Well done, Skye. Way to go.*  

May only speaks to her again as they enter the city.  

"Which alley?" She still won't look at Skye.  

Skye swallows and forces her voice to sound normal. "Santa Ana and seventh, behind Ruthie's Diner."

“Start getting your computer ready,” May says—orders. “We need to get back to the team as quickly as possible.”  

As they pull into the alley where Skye had been oh-so-politely extracted from this van earlier that morning, May puts the car in park and kills the engine.  

"No funny business," the woman says, unbuckling her seatbelt and climbing out of the car, slamming the door and moving to wait beside the sliding side door of the van. Skye takes a deep breath and flips on the interior lights before climbing out. As she slides the side door open, she waits half a second, glancing at May to watch her reaction.  

There is no recognition in her eyes. She’s really never seen this place before.  

Skye yanks her gaze away, climbs into the car, and gets to work.  

May folds her arms and stands silently in the darkness, a nearly-motionless sentry blocking any escape as Skye connects with Fitz’s computer in the plane and starts talking through the transfer of the audio file. The stream begins, and she avoids looking at May by looking quickly around her living space, assessing the damage of the search that was no-doubt done while she was in custody.  

*SHIELD lackeys would have taken anything that was top secret, but…*  

As May looks out towards the mouth of the alley, Skye reaches out and lifts the corner of her USA map from the wall. A small, folded piece of paper is still stuck on the back of the poster, but there’s
nothing stuck to the wall behind it.

Okay. So they found that, too.

Great.

Skye grabs her SD card off the shelf and slips it and the paper into the cup of her bra. May turns toward her again as they both hear Fitz jabbering through her computer about showing her his hardware, no, his equipment, and okay! we’ve got the audio file thanks a million…and Skye remembers what they’re really here for.

You’ve got the rest of your life to keep asking for answers.

You can go easy on her today.

“That should do it,” she says lightly, closing her laptop, and May finally speaks again, all business.

“Let’s head back.” The woman reaches for the sliding door.

But then there’s a blur of movement and someone is crashing into May, hitting her hard once—twice—and she’s down, not moving.

The man steps into the light. Skye’s heart has climbed into her throat, and she can only get one word out around it.

“Mike?”

The man and his son climb into the car and slam the door.

“Drive.”
August 22, 2013: May is 43, Skye is 23

It takes her a moment to remember where she is when she wakes up.

It smells like fry grease and stale soda. Her cheek is resting against sticky asphalt. She opens her eyes and sees the wheels of a dumpster, the distant mouth of an alley, and no van.

Melinda sits up sharply, making her head swim, and she looks down, taking stock of her injuries. It hurts when she inhales deeply (cracked rib), and there’s dried blood crusting in the corner of her mouth (no missing teeth), but—\textit{but}—she’s waking up clothed.

\textit{You didn’t time travel.}

\textit{You got hurt and you didn’t time travel.}

\textit{Okay.}

It’s a victory she has no time to celebrate. The sun is up and she has no idea how long the girl’s been gone.

She whips out her phone and dials Coulson as she climbs to her feet.

“They took Skye.”

\textbf{Skye:}

He wants his identity deleted, just like she’d promised she could. He’s telling his son that they’re going to take a train somewhere and start a new life, a better life, and they’re taking the nice lady with them so she can help them, like she said she would.

Skye does him the courtesy of actually deleting his records while sending out the distress signal to the plane. And then she stalls while she waits for SHIELD. It takes them less than ten minutes, but every one of them has Skye replaying her last conversation with May.

\textit{She’s alive, Skye reassures herself. She can’t be dead—otherwise she would have never visited you in the past before.}

But as first meetings go, she probably has had the historically worst string of them in the past 36 hours.

“Mr. Petersen!” she hears Coulson’s voice blaring through a megaphone outside. She exhales.
“What did you do?!” Mike yells, his face flaring an inhuman shade of red.

He kicks off the door and Skye finds herself almost immediately in Union Station, dragged along in Mike’s iron grip. She thinks fast and starts a fight to distract the man, but there’s gunshots flying past her head just when she reaches a locked exit and Mike has caught her again. He’s hauling her up, away from the people so that he can see better, and suddenly there’s another shot and Mike goes flying over the wall. Skye throws herself to the ground and looks up the barrel of a rifle in the hands of a policeman.

Wait, what? Why me?

But then there’s another blur of movement, and it takes only a few precise hits before the giant man is down and May is looking up from a steady crouch and meeting Skye’s eyes.

Skye stares back and can’t help but smile, unable to stop the rush of joy that fills her chest at the sight of the woman, regardless of the circumstances.

She’s here. And right on time. Always right on time.

May rises to her feet and moves towards her.

“You all right?” She’s not even breathing hard.

Just the pilot. Sure.

May hauls her to her feet with one pull, and Skye has to actively restrain herself from throwing her arms around the woman. It’s the first time they’ve touched in two years.

If May notices, she ignores it. “Come on,” she orders and pulls Skye after her towards the stairs.

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May:

The Science dream team pulls through and the Specialist fires a perfect shot into the man’s brain. A literal shot of dendrotoxin, stabilizing the combusting formula in his blood. The little boy won’t lose a father.

Do I know how to assemble a team, or what?

It’s not until after the man is stabilized and transported to a SHIELD facility, not until May has driven the SUV of their agents back to the Bus, not until the four young people, sleep-deprived but still high on adrenaline, are climbing out of the car and heading back into the plane, giggly and shaking, that she and Coulson are finally alone. They linger in the car for a moment, and she watches him watch his team and the hacker stagger back up the cargo ramp on trembling legs, a bright-eyed smile hiding just out of sight.

She knows that look. His proud dad look. And she can’t let it run away with him.

“So, not bad for day one, huh?” Coulson asks as he unbuckles his seatbelt and opens his door.

“Coulson,” she says quickly, and he pauses. “You can’t keep the hacker on the plane.”

He stares back at her, reading the look in her eyes, then closes the car door again and faces her.

“What is it, Melinda?”
He only calls her that when he wants to make sure she knows she’s talking to her friend, not her superior.

May takes a steadying breath. “Phil, she knows about me.”

The surprise shows immediately in the lines of his brow. “How is that possible?” he breathes. “You said that it’s not on any record. You said…”

“She didn’t dig it up,” May cuts him off, watching as the girl collapses tiredly into a jumpseat and continues chattering with a grinning Dr. Simmons. “She...she says I visited her while she was growing up. More than a few times.”

Coulson follows her gaze, watching the unremarkable girl along with her. After a long moment, he shrugs. “I feel like I should be jealous. You only visited me once before we met in real time.”

Melinda swallows, her voice growing tighter. “It’s not just the traveling. She knows that I was married, that I got shot in the leg in Bahrain, that I don’t like coffee… things no one would know unless I told them.”

Coulson nods, looking away, thinking.

“I want her off the plane, Coulson,” May presses. “I know you see her as an asset, but we can’t add one more liability to this team.”

“She handled herself just fine when a superhuman took her captive,” Coulson immediately says defensively. “She kept her head, kept calm…”

“And then we had to swoop in and save her because she was completely in over her head,” May snaps back. “She’s not cleared for combat. She’s not trained to withstand torture. She doesn’t have any respect for secrecy. And that makes her the biggest security risk you could bring on the plane, not only for me but for any SHIELD intel.”

He nods. “Noted. But she could be a big help as a consultant. Someone outside our system who can bring a new perspective and has her own network of information.”

“Coulson, listen to yourself. Her network is criminal. Bringing her on would be like unpacking the Trojan Horse and walking the soldiers in by the hand. You want someone for computers, we can pull someone from Communications. She's a risk that we don't have to take.”

The man sighs. He looks at his dream team, his plane. He doesn’t look at her.

“May, you do realize that if you’ve already visited her, then nothing I do can stop it from happening. What’s that phrase you’re always saying about how ‘things only happen the way they happen’?”

Betrayal seeps cold through her chest. She won't threaten to leave the team if he won't listen (she can't), so she lands on the only threat she's able to make. “Phil, if you make the decision to bring on another non-combatant, I won’t be responsible for her.”

“Yes you will, Agent May,” the man says harshly, rounding on her with a forceful gaze. All the gentleness has disappeared from his voice. “You will be responsible, and you will keep her safe, because that is the job you joined this organization to do. I can’t believe you’re even trying to make me think that you would leave her in the line of fire just to get back at me.”

May looks away, clenching her teeth. Beside her, she sees Coulson’s hand twitch towards his pocket, but then it falls back to rest in a loose fist on his thigh. “I know you’re scared, Mel, because
this isn’t like you at all. You take responsibility for everything, including the things you shouldn’t.”

He reaches for the door handle again. “I’m going to make her an offer. You can adjust your anger accordingly, but direct it at me, not her.”

“Phil.” She looks over at him, relying on the compassion and logic in him in equal measures. "Please. We can't trust her.”

He meets her eyes. His voice is very level.

"I did not say that I trust her. And I'm not asking you to, either. She can earn it, just like everyone else has to.”

He climbs out of the car and slams the door.

Melinda resists punching the steering wheel, hating this feeling that she is too late to something that hasn't even begun.

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Skye:

Skye cannot figure out how a man this young has a car this old, but she likes the way it feels, riding with the top down. Ace seemed to love it too, waving his hands on the air currents the whole drive out to his aunt’s house.

Now, as the boy runs inside with his cousin and a heart full of promises that Skye dearly hopes SHIELD intends to keep, Coulson walks close to her as they return to his car.

“It’s funny,” the man says as they traipse through the tall California grass. “When Ward and I tracked you down yesterday, we thought we were the ones making first contact. But it seems that’s not actually the case, is it?”

Skye stops walking, stuffing her hands in her dress’s pockets as she looks over at him.

“So May told you?”

He pulls something out of his jacket pocket. “And I found this.” He offers her a worn sheet of folded copy paper.

Skye knows what it is before she opens it.

"So you’re the one who took it from my van."

It’s the only picture of May that she ever managed to capture in nineteen years of visits, a candid photo she’d snuck on her laptop camera years ago, one she still can’t believe that she got away with. It's not a great picture—May is looking down and away, her dark hair falling in her face, which is barely squeezed into the top edge of the photo. It's mostly a picture of her body, her strong arms wrapped around herself and her hands resting in anxious fists. Because the computer had been sitting on the coffee table, even her bare legs made it into the picture, the scars on her knees clearly visible.

The day it was taken had not been the last time she saw May, but it was obviously a bad day for the woman. There's a barely-visible trickle of blood running out of the sleeve of the borrowed shirt she was wearing (one of Skye's). May had been unwilling, as always, to tell her what had just happened, what life she had just left to tumble into Skye's own. Skye had felt bad taking advantage of whatever internal distraction May had, but she had just started trying her hand at hacking CCTV cameras and
“You said she’s been visiting you for years?” Coulson is asking, staring steadily at her.

Skye nods, stuffing the picture back into her pocket before he can take it away again. “Pretty much every couple of months since I was four.”

“And that’s what the map on your van wall was. All the places she’s found you in the past?”

Skye thinks of her van, hopefully being towed from Union station, minus a door. The map’s probably blowing around in the parking lot somewhere now. She nods again.

“You sure got around growing up,” Coulson says.

*You say that like it's a good thing.*

“And, hacking into SHEILD, were you looking for her?”

Skye shakes her head, “No. She would never tell me what her job was. Hacking SHIELD was just good fun.” She plasters a smirk over her lie.

Coulson is studying her, and Skye forces herself to hold his gaze. When the man speaks, she hears careful, measured words that leave little room for misinterpretation.

“I want you to stick with us, Skye, at least for a little while,” he says. “But I can tell that you have an agenda, whether you admit to it or not. And no one can do anything about that, so let’s agree now: no sneaking around. You can study and observe, but if you want to see what we do and possibly be a part of it, then you’re going to do it inside the limits I assign you. You don’t hack; you don’t dig. You want to know something, you ask. And if you break my trust, or May’s, for that matter, I can assure you that you will not recover it easily, if at all. Is that clear?”

In her pocket, Skye’s hand clenches around the photo of the woman she’s been waiting nearly twenty years to know. She nods.

“I’ve had enough years for questions,” she says, meeting his eyes. “I’m ready for answers. And I’ll do whatever it takes to get them.”

She does not think for one second that he’s missed the ambiguity in her response, but he seems willing to leave it there. His lips turn into a knowing smile, and he resumes walking towards his car.

Skye’s hand relaxes around the picture in her pocket as she falls into step beside him.

“Can I ask you something now?” she says as they approach the corvette. “You know all about May’s…situation, and you’ve obviously known for awhile, but she’s your pilot. Why would you ask her to fly a plane if she might randomly…go?”

Coulson smiles to himself as he goes to the driver’s side and opens his door. “We go way back—I trust her. If she says she has it under control, then she has it under control. And the plane has autopilot.”

Skye remembers what May had told her once about tai chi and self-awareness and guesses that those are what he’s referring to. As she opens her own door and drops into the shotgun seat, she realizes that for the first time, she’s talking to someone who has known May as long as she has.

“The woman that I met yesterday is…a lot different than the woman who’s been visiting me,” Skye
says slowly, staring forward even as she feels Coulson turn to look at her. “Has she always been… like this?”

She turns and meets his eyes, and Skye can see that there’s something he wants to tell her. But he only shakes his head sympathetically.

“I can only imagine how long you’ve been holding on to your questions. But all these things you want to know—you’re going to have to learn them the old-fashioned way: by asking May herself. It will be the most fair to both of you.”

Just then, Agent Ward is on the corvette’s comms talking about something called an 0-8-4, and Coulson is saying that they’ll be right there. He turns the keys in the ignition.

“Can I ask you one last thing?” Skye says quickly before the car moves. “Nothing huge. Well, not huge to you…”

Coulson indulges her as he presses a button and the car’s tires are replaced with turbines. “You can always ask.”

Skye takes a deep breath. “What’s Agent May’s first name?”

He smiles gently at her. For the first time, it feels like he understands.

“Melinda.”

*Melinda…May.*

The car lifts into the air. Skye buckles her seatbelt and feels breathless for more than one reason.

When they land on the runway near the Bus, Skye sees her van waiting for her on the tarmac and Agent May striding up the ramp. The woman glances at the landing car and does not seem surprised to see Skye, but she does not stop. The car settles back onto its tires as the woman disappears into the plane and Coulson turns towards Skye, giving her one last quiet order.

“Go easy on her, Skye. And keep her secret.”

Skye looks away and nods. “I always have.”

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to Book_freak for always being willing to let me talk out scenes and bounce ideas around with you. And thank you ALL for your encouraging comments! I’m glad so many people have been willing to give this a look!
First Meeting, One

June 11, 1994-- Melinda is 46, Skye is 4

Melinda opens her eyes to a new ceiling, a new living room, a new house. Her head is spinning, and after dark here, wherever here is. She climbs to her feet and tries to take a sliding, quiet step across the floor, but her equilibrium is taking longer than usual to zero and she stumbles over something pliable and plastic, catching herself on a lumpy sofa. She isn’t snapping back to her present right away, so she forces herself to focus.

Pause. Breathe. You're probably in a stranger's home and you don't need a fight right now.

She lowers herself onto the sofa and quietly detangles her ankle from the Hot Wheels track that she had tripped over. Her eyes adjust to the dark, and she sees more toys scattered about on the floor between her seat and an empty TV stand. She is sure she doesn't recognize this house, so she's not displaced into one of her old homes. She has no idea if anyone’s home, though, or how many people that might mean.

This probably means...

She should be sleeping somewhere...

Clothes first.

There is a basket of unfolded laundry sitting beside the sofa. Most of it is children’s clothes, so she pulls on the first adult-sized t-shirt she finds—a long-sleeved gray crew-neck that hangs loosely around her and conceals her lack of a bra. The only adult pants in the basket are a pair of jeans that could hold two people her size, so she opts for a pair of basketball shorts that probably belong to some preteen who loves Michael Jordan (must be the 90s...).

Shoes might be by the door. Check for a home alarm.

The house feels small—it takes only three soft steps across worn-down shag carpet for her to peer down a short hallway. Four closed doors that are probably bedrooms and bathrooms. She moves towards the opposite doorway off the living room and sees a small kitchen and dining area, where she quickly grabs a letter opener and an assortment of small things that make picking locks easier off the tiny counter-desk, stuffing them in the shorts pocket. There’s a calendar on the wall beside the humming refrigerator that tells her it's June.

She doesn’t see any home alarm system beside the back door on the other side of the cheap dining set, but, thankfully, there are piles of sneakers in varied sizes around the mat. As she lowers herself into a chair to inspect the shoes, she sees a newspaper on the table unfolded to the five-day weather forecast for Des Moines, Iowa.

Des Moines.

June.

Her breath freezes in her chest, and she pulls over the newspaper to see the date in the corner.


Her heart manages to sink a few inches within her chest even as it begins to beat faster in worry.
No…no…no. Please, not this visit.

Not now.

She bites her lip, considering her options.

Just leave, Melinda. If you leave without seeing her it just means you'll be back another time to do this visit...hopefully when things are better...

She stands quickly, snatching up the first pair of shoes she sees that look big enough for her feet, and reaches for the deadbolt on the door, only to find it already unlocked.

Awfully responsible.

The door opens with the softest creak, revealing a screen door, which she pushes open just wide enough to slip through. There is a small, uncovered back porch against the house opening out to a chainlink-fenced backyard (easy enough to get out of) containing a trampoline and small swing set.

Melinda closes the door softly behind herself and sits down on the back step to pull on the shoes. She nearly jumps out of her skin, however, when she hears a single word slip through the darkness in front of her.

"Lina?"

The voice is impossibly small.

Melinda holds her breath and looks up slowly. At the opposite edge of the porch, a child is sitting in a plastic lawn chair, emerging from the blanket Melinda hadn’t noticed her under. In her hands are a book and a flashlight, which the girl clicks on, raising it to Melinda’s face.

So this is how it happens.

"Hey, little one," Melinda whispers with a gentle smile, straightening up to face the girl but not moving closer. "You must be Mary. I was told I'd find you here."

"Who are you?" The girl asks, twisting out of the blanket and landing on bare feet on the deck. This is undoubtedly the smallest incarnation of Skye that Melinda has ever seen, hardly the height and weight that any four-year-old ought to be. Familiar dark eyes peek from beneath a choppy haircut that just brushes her shoulders, where a too-big t-shirt hangs to her knees, her bare calves mosquito-bitten and pale in the moonlight, the burn scar covering more of her foot than it will in the future. The child doesn’t move closer, standing just beyond arm’s reach, appearing more confused than suspicious. "Are you one of Lina’s friends?"

"No, your foster sister doesn’t know me," Melinda says quickly, shaking her head and squinting into the brightness of the flashlight. "I'm just here to see you."

Skye cocks her head, lowering the light slightly. "Why?"

Every child’s favorite question.

But Melinda has to swallow, keeping all the answers lodged in her throat.

Because I am about to unfairly throw your whole life into confusion.
Because there will come a time when I will have so many regrets with you at the center.

Because you're going to be the cause of so much pain that I never asked for but know I deserve.

Because someday, I will leave you, and you will leave me because that's the way things happen, but somehow the universe will keep letting us try again.

Because the universe knows that we need each other, even we'll never be able to explain why.

But Skye’s not ready for those answers yet. Wrapping her arms around her own bare knees, Melinda leans forward and stares solemnly into the child’s dark eyes as she answers.

"Because, Mary, someday, when you're a big girl, you and I are going to be friends. And sometimes I come and visit my friends before they have met me...which is strange, I know...but it means that you are very special to me"

Even if I can't yet explain how.

The girl studies her, the flashlight held in a rigid arm. “Are you Santa?” she asks suspiciously.

Melinda feels herself smile, huffing out a soft laugh. “No. You can call me May.”

The girl lowers the flashlight beam a little.

“You’re wearing Mommy’s shirt, Tyler’s shorts, and Lina’s shoes.” It doesn’t sound like an accusation, just an observation.

Melinda looks down at her horrible outfit and shrugs. “Yeah, I just needed to borrow them while I’m here. I needed to put clothes on to go outside. Speaking of, why are you out here anyway? Aren’t you supposed to be in bed?”

Skye looks away guiltily. “I was looking at books, but Jackie and Lina say the flashlight keeps them awake. And Mommy would just take the flashlight away if she caught me out of my room. So…”

“I love looking at books,” Melinda says encouragingly. “Can you show me which one you have there?”

They are the magic words. Skye finally lowers the flashlight completely and pads over to May. The little girl stands by her knees as she hands her the book, a tall but thin hardcover, the library cellophane glinting in the low light as May turns it over and looks at the cover.

She recognizes the picture of the house and the title character and smiles as she looks up at Skye.

“I love this story.”

Skye looks sullen. “I like the pictures, but I can’t read it yet. Mommy says I’m going to learn how to read next year.” She smiles at the thought.

Melinda stares through the darkness at the little girl who still hasn’t caught on to the impermanent nature of her homes, who still calls her foster mothers “Mommy” and has no fear of the future...and it suddenly hurts to breathe.

This is the most innocent that she has ever seen Skye. The most intact.

The least broken.
“Would it be all right if I read this book to you right now?” she offers around the lump in her throat. “You’ve seen the pictures, you already know how it ends, but it makes more sense when you hear the story.”

Skye looks at her, making some kind of judgment, and nods silently, returning to the lawn chair and picking up the blanket.

Melinda shifts off the back step and leans back against the siding of the house, stretching her legs out in front of her. “Do you want to—“

But Skye is already climbing onto her lap, the position of a child who knows how stories are meant to be read, who hasn't had enough dismissive families to break her of this habit yet...

*She's so small,* Melinda thinks again, wrapping her arms around Skye and arranging her blanket over their legs. Her cheek rests against the little girl’s hair as she opens the book in front of them both.

“Can you hold the light on the pages while we read?” Melinda whispers.

Wordlessly, Skye points the flashlight up at the book.

Melinda takes a deep breath of backyard grass and tear-free shampoo.

"*In an old house in Paris that was covered with vines lived twelve little girls in two straight lines…*"

Skye has slumped back against her after eight pages. By the time they reach the end, the flashlight has fallen askew. As Melinda closes the book, she takes the flashlight gently from the girl’s hands and clicks it off.

*Now she knows how the story ends.*

*Now I know how the story begins.*

Night wraps around them as she stares up at the Midwestern stars, at the unforgiving universe that has yet to explain itself. One of Skye’s hands remains in hers, and Melinda gently runs her thumb over the fingers that will one day code computers, deliver punches, pull triggers, and summon earthquakes. She thinks of the bullets and bruises and shattered bones and broken hearts that are all coming for them without mercy, of the years of pain and heartache waiting to be rolled out like a runway before the girl in her arms.

She hates knowing, and she hates knowing she can’t stop it.

*If I took her now and ran as far as I could and got her somewhere safe...If I put her in a better home that would keep her healthy and happy and never let her anywhere near SHIELD...*

She looks down at the sleeping face resting against her shoulder, already knowing that there is no *if* in either of their lives anymore.

*That’s not what happens.*

*That’s not what happened.*

*That’s not the way we happen.*

She rests her brow on the top of Skye’s head and breathes in the innocence, breathes through the pain, swallows down against the grief clogging up her throat. Her chest is still tight, but now she also
feels the dip in her stomach, the warning that the pull of time is about to be reversed.

This is how it happens. I leave you. Starting now.

Skye wakes a little as Melinda holds her carefully against her chest and climbs to her feet.

“Hmm?” she murmurs sleepily, shifting without opening her eyes, and Melinda shushes her gently.

“I’m going to take you back inside so that you don’t wake up out here,” Melinda whispers, easing the screen door and back door open. “Stay quiet.”

She slips silently back through the house, forgoing the risk of waking anyone else by entering the wrong bedroom and simply laying the little girl down on the couch. As she spreads the girl’s blanket over her, Skye’s eyes open.

“Are you leaving?” she asks quietly, and Melinda hates that she doesn’t sound surprised. She wishes she could stay and prove her wrong.

Her hands are tingling, though. She doesn’t have a choice.

She kneels beside the sofa, brushing Skye’s hair back and leaning in close to the little girl’s face.

“Yes. I’m sorry I can’t stay longer,” Melinda whispers. She tries to smile. “If you watch, you’ll see me disappear. But, I promise, I’m going to come see you again. Next time, you’ll be five, and it will be February first. Can you remember that date until then?”

The girl is confused, trying to sit up, reaching out with one hand, wanting more, always wanting more, but Melinda is out of time and historically never enough of what Skye deserves…

She catches the girl’s hand and holds on.

“February first. Remember that day, Sk—Mary. I promise I’ll find you,” she gasps out as her head swims.

“May?”

She brings Skye’s hand to her cheek and brushes her lips against the tiny palm. “I love you, sweetheart, and I am so sorry.”

The last thing she sees is a pair of bewildered brown eyes. And then the world tilts, and she’s back at the Playground, falling to the ground on her hands and knees and leaving only tears in Skye's hand.
Saying goodbye to the van was easier than Skye expected. Especially when she’s moving into a Bus, which is in fact a plane. The pair of scientists seem more than thrilled by the news that she’s coming with them, but Ward says only a handful of words in greeting, and Skye sees only a dark shadow once that she thinks *might* have been May.

Since it takes only a few minutes to unpack her things into the tiny bunk, Skye spends most of the flight time wandering through the plane, absorbing the things she hadn’t been able to see on her first time here. They’ve been airborne for four hours by the time she makes her way up the spiral staircase to Coulson’s office. He’s bent over a tablet computer at his desk, but looks up when she knocks.

“Seriously, this is a kick-ass way to commute for work,” she says, lingering in the doorway until he beckons her in. “You know, I’ve never been on a plane before. Had no idea they made them like this.”

Coulson smiles a little as he replies. “Well, I didn’t travel this well for most of my years as an agent—you and the younger agents are luckier than most.”

Skye smiles, glancing at the chair he points her to but choosing to remain standing as she approaches his desk.

“I’m sure this isn’t a good time to talk about this, but this is kind of a new thing for me—being able to talk about May at all. I mean, it’s a nineteen-year secret that’s suddenly just…” She waves her hands, trying to find a word. “…not a secret. And this can’t be comfortable for you, being in the middle of this, but I really am glad that you know too.”

“The others don’t, in case that wasn’t clear,” Coulson says carefully, “so don’t get too comfortable.”

“Yeah, I think this is the third time I’m hearing that,” Skye says, thinking of May’s threat in her van…more or less the last time they spoke. “But what I came here to say is that I…well, there’s something that May told me to do. The last time I saw her, I mean. She told me the last time I saw her to do something when I met her again…”

“What is it, Skye?” Coulson asks patiently, seeming just a little suspicious.

She takes a deep breath and pulls the folded piece of paper from her jeans pocket, the one he had missed on his first search of her van.

“She told me to give this to her when we met again.” She holds it out to him. “But…I mean…you can probably tell that she doesn’t…I guess she…” She closes her eyes, trying to string together a coherent sentence. “I just think she might actually look at it if it came from you, sir.”

She opens her eyes as Coulson reaches across the desk and takes the paper from her hand, looking questioningly at her as he starts to unfold it.

She shrugs. “Go ahead.”
He gently flattens the single sheet on his desk. The paper is worn soft with time and handling and taped in several places, the ink faded but still perfectly legible. It’s a list scribbled on wide-ruled notebook paper, written first in the clear print of someone trying to make something easily legible for children, then transitioning into the cramped scrawl that characterizes Skye’s own handwriting.

It’s the List. The table of contents. The memories that apparently have yet to be made.

“Twenty-six times?” Coulson exhales as he scans the dates on the paper. “I didn’t realize that it was that many.”

“Twenty-eight, actually. The first two weren’t written down because…well, because. There was a gap, you can see, from 2001 to 2004 where I didn’t see her for a long time, but besides that, the visits were pretty regular.” Nausea rises in her stomach, the awful feeling that she still gets when she remembers the 2004 visit, and she presses her tongue against the roof of her mouth.

“And the last time was…” Coulson looks at the last date on the List. “Two years ago?”

Skye nods. “Not long after I moved to LA.”

“Did she tell you that it was the last time?”

Skye thinks of that final visit and fights the unavoidable warm feeling that displaces the sickness. She nods again, looking down. “Yeah. She told me that the next time I saw her would be her present day. She didn’t tell me how long it would take though. Just that she wouldn’t know me and it was going to be a rough start for both of us.”

Coulson is staring at the paper, and she can practically see the gears turning.

_Have fun. I’ve been trying to work this out for years._

“Did you ever find out what this says?” Coulson asks, touching the line of Chinese characters scribbled across the bottom.

“May added that to the paper on her last visit,” Skye says, nodding. “I had someone in Chinatown read them to me. I think May was writing a message to herself—something about ‘remembering the dates’ and ‘not letting the girl escape’.”

Coulson is nodding, something making his mouth pull tight. “More or less,” he agrees, folding the paper back up. “I’ll make sure that she gets this when there’s a moment of quiet. Once the mission’s over, of course.”

He locks it in his desk drawer.

Skye meets his eyes as he straightens back up. “Thank you,” she says quietly. “For giving me a chance, even knowing what you know. And for listening, which is more than she’s done so far. It’s nice to know you’re in my corner.”

“I don’t pit teammates against each other,” Coulson says slowly, holding her gaze, the faintest trace of warning in his tone. “So don’t expect me to take sides in this. I’m in favor of whatever course causes the least disturbance within this plane. Besides that, what happens to you and May is up to you and May.”

At that moment, the woman’s voice fills the cabin, and Skye jumps. “*Touching down in ten minutes,*” May’s voice says over the intercom.
Coulson stands and passes Skye towards his office door. “Let’s get down there and buckle up for landing. And then let’s see what kind of 0-8-4 we’re dealing with.”

**August 24, 2013: May is 43, Skye is 23**

She is still a little amazed that it took more than 48 hours for something like this to happen. The taste in her mouth tells her it was chloroform-based knockout gas. The pain in her shoulders before she even moves tells her that her hands are bound behind her back. And the banter she’s hearing above her head tells her that she’s right where she’s supposed to be: with her team. *The unexpected happened, and still no time travel. Okay.*

*No matter what’s happening, this was still another success.*

“This never would have happened if Agent May hadn’t been on the stick,” she hears the hacker saying—*Oh you’re still here, are you?—*sounding like she’s sitting very close. “She would have busted out some of her ninja know-how.”

“Agent May?” Fitz responds. “No, no, she transferred from Administration.”

Skye sounds proud as she responds, “Well, I’ve seen her destroy a guy, so…”

There’s a moment’s pause, and she guesses they’re all looking at her.

Ward speaks next, slowly. “You’ve heard of the Cavalry?”

*Dammit, kid, what did I just tell you?*

“She’s the Cavalry?!”

“I told you never to call me that.” She lets her voice verge on a growl as she opens her eyes and sits up slowly.

For all the fuss she and Ward made about three non-combatants on the plane, the four kids pull together remarkably well. The plan to take back their plane comes together with the four of them chattering at each other, four different perspectives leading to the most hodge-podge strategy she has ever heard…And somehow it works. They take back the plane with no more injuries except to the hijackers.

It’s amazing. They’re amazing.

But the kids sure do talk a lot.

They make it to the Slingshot with a life raft patching the hole in their fuselage and send all their unwanted passengers to a SHIELD detention facility. The 0-8-4 is jettisoned to the sun, and Coulson isn’t even as mad about the plane as she thinks he should be. As they all sit on the cargo ramp and watch the rocket with its dangerous cargo leave the atmosphere, she tries not to think of the hacker hesitating (lurking) behind them. May doesn’t know if it’s because she’s uncertain of her place or if she’s staying back because she’s afraid of getting too close to May again.

She tries not to care how the girl feels.

This was her team first.

They’ll have to burn at least a few days at the Slingshot until the Bus is repaired, so everyone packs a
May tries to be the last to leave the plane, but she is unsurprised to find Coulson waiting for her in the common area as she slips out of her bunk near the cockpit, a duffle bag in hand.

“Ready?” he asks, tossing her her flight jacket, which she slips over her shoulders, staring at the hole in the cabin wall. Coulson looks in the direction of her gaze as he picks up his own bag.

“I feel like I should apologize for the plane, seeing as you’re the pilot, but…”

“But I didn’t stop the kids from doing it, so we know who’s really to blame.” May shoulders her duffle, offering him a shrug. They set off together towards the cargo-level exit.

“I think I get more of the blame for letting the soldiers on the plane in the first place,” Coulson says a moment later as they step out into the hangar, “but let’s not get into that just now. I wanted to tell you that you’re doing a great job so far, especially with…all things considered.”

May shoots him a warning look. “You mean the Pandora’s box that we haven’t even cracked open yet? It’s only been 48 hours, Coulson. Give it time.”

He lets that comment slide. “Ward offered to be the girl’s S.O.”

May nods, looking ahead as they approach the base’s entrance. “I gave him the nudge. She needs one if you’re going to keep her. Someone to keep her busy enough to leave me alone and under close enough supervision to keep her out of trouble.”

Coulson sighs, pulling out his card to scan at the entrance. “Could you not talk about her like she’s a stray that we just picked up off the street?”

May shrugs, scanning her card at the door and shoving it open after the locks slide loudly back. “I’m sorry, is that not what she is?”

They step into the brightly-lit building, heading for the elevators that will take them up to the lodging level. May has the sneaking suspicion that Coulson is waiting to say anything else until they’re alone again, and she is right.

“Left pocket,” he says as soon as the elevator doors close.

She touches the pocket of her jacket and feels a thin, flat shape. She pulls out a folded piece of paper, soft and discolored by time.

She looks at him sharply. “Coulson. What is this?”

“What are you so scared of?

It’s just a piece of paper.

She unfolds the fragile paper and sees her own handwriting filling the top of the page, a list of dates twenty-six items long that shifts into another hand about halfway through. There is tape holding it together in several places, as though it had been torn more than once and then taped back together by regretful hands.

The elevator dings, and the doors open on a floor reminiscent of a cheap hotel.

“Make sure you read the last line,” Coulson says. He’s already stepping out and walking away, his
job done.

But May remains in the elevator, still staring at the paper, absorbing the message at the bottom.

A single line of Chinese characters, scribbled in her own hand:

[[Remember these dates, Meimei, for her. Don't try to let this girl go.]]

Chapter End Notes

This is my first attempt at an AU, so I'm always curious what you guys think-let me know how you think this is going, good or bad!
March 19, 1990: Melinda is 20 and 44

"Mei Qiaolian?"

No matter how deeply asleep she is, something about hearing her name in her own voice always manages to get through.

Melinda rolls over on her bed and is unsurprised to see Jiejie climbing to her feet in the corner of the room, grabbing a SHIELD-issue workout jacket from the hook on the back of the door to wrap herself in. It's Carolyn's, so it goes down far enough to cover all the necessary places.

"When are you here from?" she tiredly asks her older self, not moving from the bed. That question doesn't always get an answer from these visitors, but this time it does.

"2013," the woman responds. She looks around the dorm room. "Academy…third year?"

"Yeah, meaning I still have a roommate," Melinda says, glancing towards the door.

"Oh yeah, but don't worry--I remember this visit. You're an invalid this weekend, aren't you?" The woman is looking at the scatterplot of cough drop wrappers and tissues across the floor and thermos peeking out from the pile of blankets on Melinda's bed. "Trying to get over the flu?"

Melinda nods, sinking back into her pillow. "Yeah, I guess that's what it is. It felt worse than ever this morning."

The woman crosses the tiled dormitory floor to Melinda's bed, which is elevated enough to stow a dresser and trunk beneath, leaving her not quite lofted but high enough to make her feel like she's in a hospital bed. As she flips on the lamp and leans over her, Jiejie seems a little concerned by Melinda's appearance.

"How many days have you been sick?" she asks, her brow furrowing slightly.


Jiejie touches her forehead with the back of her hand.

"You're still running a fever. Here, give me your thermos," the woman requests. Melinda extracts the silver canister from her blankets, and the woman takes it from her hand.

She hears her electric kettle being refilled in the bathroom sink and placed on its stand.

"It's Saturday night, right, kid?" Jie is asking as the water begins to warm up.

Melinda starts to answer, but her throat snags on the words. As she buries a mucous-ridden cough in a handful of blanket, she manages a dramatic nod. The woman looks at her sympathetically while pulling on a pair of sweatpants and sneakers from the floor.

"Okay, well, I'm taking your keys and ID card. I'll be right back."

By the time Melinda has finished coughing, the older Melinda is gone, the door locking behind her. Melinda isn't expecting to drift off while waiting for her to come back, but she startles awake again at
the sound of a key in the door.

The older Melinda slips quickly into the room, dropping the keys and ID card and a plastic bag on the desk and locking the door behind her. Melinda watches as the woman starts pulling out juice, crackers, medicine...

"Did you seriously just go shopping for me?" Melinda asks dreamily, taking the crackers that are offered and stuffing them under her pillow.

"It's not like you've used your commissary credit much this week, right?" The woman isn’t really asking. Melinda can tell that she remembers.

"Did you bump into anyone we know?" Melinda asks, letting her eyes fall shut again.

"I saw Phil studying in the common room on this floor." She can hear Jiejie opening something wrapped in cellophane, mixing something in her thermos. "I get the feeling he's lurking in case you decide to actually ask someone else for help. But I snuck past him."

“He's seen you once already, you know. Remember that time you dropped in the gym but I was definitely out on a field assignment in Juarez?"

Jiejie is quiet for a moment, thinking. “That was already five years ago for me,” she says, sounding a little disbelieving. “Well, he’s going to catch on before this year is up, anyway."

Melinda’s eyes fly open and she nearly sits up, horrified. “What? How?"

Jiejie just smirks, pouring water from the kettle over the contents of the thermos. “Sorry, Meimei. You’ll just have to wait. But you won’t have to do all the explaining alone.”

Melinda drops her head back onto the pillow, coughing horribly again. “Can’t wait,” she gasps through the coughs.

Jie crowds against her bed, holding the refilled thermos. "Let me help you sit up," she offers, slipping a hand under Melinda’s shoulder.

"I can do it," she insists, levering up on one elbow.

"I know you can, kid, but let me make it easier," Jie says patiently.

*If there's one person who knows how stubborn you can be...*

Once Jiejie’s got her sitting propped against the wall, she opens the thermos and presses it into Melinda’s hands. "Try to get at least half of that in you before you lie down again."

The steaming drink inside smells like honey, ginger, and herbs.

"What is this?" she asks as Jie disappears into the bathroom.

"It's something you'll like. Just drink it." The woman returns with a warm, damp cloth and blots gently at Melinda’s face and neck while she drinks. Once that’s done, she starts picking up the tissues and trash on the floor, relegating everything to the wastebasket.

"Mint? Lavender? Lemon? Ginger?" Melinda guesses a few moments later, screwing the cap back on and lying back down on the bed.

"All of the above" the woman says as she straightens up. She holds up the ingredients, dropping
them one by one back into a plastic bag. “Amazing what mixing teas like cocktails can do when you throw in a little honey and lemon from the cafeteria too.”

The woman stows the bag of rations under the bed, then does a last turn around the room, seeming to have run out of things to do. She finally turns towards the bed again. "Look, I was in bed too when I disappeared, so can I get in there with you?"

Melinda groans into the pillow. "Can't you just sleep on Carolyn's bed?"

Jie gives her a Look. "We both know how pissed she gets when anyone even sits on her bed. And by the time she gets back, you won't have anyone else to blame it on."

Melinda sighs. "Whatever. But if you take this twentieth-century flu back to the future with you, it's your fault alone."

"That's true no matter which way you mean that," the woman says, kicking off the borrowed shoes.

The older (but somehow no taller, damn it) version of herself climbs up at the foot of the bed and stretches out beside her on top of the covers. Melinda turns on her side to lend more space and buries a cough in a handful of blanket, but Jiejie doesn't draw back.

"Am I going to miss my next field test?" Melinda rasps, glancing up.

The woman looks up at the ceiling, her brow furrowing like she's trying to remember. "Laos? No, you'll go. But you'll miss a few others if you don't take better care of yourself."

"And what do you call this?" Melinda asks, lifting her head and staring at herself pointedly.

The woman shakes her head and sets it on the pillow beside Melinda's. "Rectification. The universe giving me a second chance."

Melinda’s brow furrows, mirroring Jie’s expression from earlier.

*Well, that's new.*

"But that's not always how it works, is it?" Melinda asks, watching her older self carefully. "When you travel..."

The woman’s shaking her head. "No. We've talked about this, I'm sure."

"I can join, but I can't change," Melinda repeats the words an older self has told her before. “I can participate but not affect the outcome.”

"Exactly. I can come in here and tell you not to be stupid, to take better care of yourself and not play tough when you’re sick, but it’s not going to change the memories I have of the way you/I am going to ignore that advice in the future. I can't keep events from happening that I already know happen."

“Even big things?”

“*Especially* big things.”

They lapse into silence, broken only by Melinda's own textured breathing. With the older Melinda finally close enough to study, she stares at her older self through heavy eyes, adding the woman's age —*Seriously, do I really still look this good at 44?*— to her mental timeline of the slowly unspooling future. The woman doesn't have any visible injuries that suggest the recent events of 2013, but she looks...worn down. Her face isn't wrinkled, her hair isn't going gray, but the years have carved her in
other ways. It's obvious to Melinda, if no one else.

She lays beside her older self and wonders for the thousandth time when this is going to begin for her; when the time-travel trigger will finally be pulled. The youngest she's ever seen of her time traveling self (the selves who told her their ages) is 39. Whatever's coming, it could happen at 33, 28, 37…it could happen next week. It's certainly a possibility. But Melinda can only think of one way to find out for sure.

The question sits heavy on her tongue, and she sighs instead.

Jiejie’s eyes have fallen shut, but, of course, she knows. "Just say it."

"Can't you just tell me--"

"No."

"Just the year? My age? How many years of peace I have left before this whole mess starts?"

Now Jiejie sighs and opens her eyes.

"What would you do, Meimei? If you knew how it was going to happen, if you knew when and where, what difference would it make?"

The answer seems obvious. "I'd run. I'd stay away from the situation and make sure it never happened."

"But you don't avoid it," Jiejie says gently. "You know that. I'm here because you don't. Things only happen one way—the way they happen."

Melinda grasps at her reasons, knowing how pathetic they sound. "I could…prepare, at least. I could...

Jiejie is shaking her head. "Meimei, who would believe you?"

"I could at least...have a little peace if it was still far away—" Melinda starts coughing again and gives up. Jiejie waits for the noise to subside before responding.

"But that peace would wear off daily as the year got closer. And then imagine how you would be when that year arrived. You'd be waiting each day for a sign of what was going to happen. You wouldn't be yourself."

"What about..."

"Melinda," the woman rolls on her side and faces her fully, holding her gaze. "I didn't know. You aren't going to know. The fact that you know that it's going to come with a bullet wound to the calf is already too much."

"But..." And to Melinda’s surprise and embarrassment, her eyes are suddenly filled with frustrated tears.

Jiejie doesn't seem surprised, just presses a tissue into her hand and brushes back her hair with gentle fingers as Melinda ducks her head, curling into a ball against her.

The woman sighs against the top of her head, dragging her fingernails gently through her hair. "Meimei, I realize how unfair this is. I know that you are going to wonder and worry about what’s coming, no matter what I say. But you know what else? You're going to live your life. You're going
to be an agent and be a friend and be loved by people who you don't deserve…and that's the life I can tell you that you'll have."

Melinda sniffs into the space near the woman’s chest. "Until this takes it away."

Jiejie is quiet for a moment, but then she corrects her. "No. This just makes everything harder."

They lie together in silence for a long time, and Jiejie eventually reaches up and flips off the lamp, settling onto her side beside Melinda again.

“What am I going to say if Carolyn walks in and you’re still here?” Melinda asks in the darkness, feeling the woman resume combing out her three-days-dirty hair with her fingertips.

“I told you—it won’t be a problem,” Jiejie exhales against the top of her head. “Carolyn is avoiding the sick ward tonight by sleeping in her boyfriend’s bed.”

“She has a boyfriend?”

“Oh, and that reminds me—” Jiejie taps the crown of her head gently even as her voice goes a little stiff. “The next time you spar with Marcus Delano, make sure that you accidentally break his nose.”

Melinda shakes her head beneath Jie's hand. “I hate when you say things like that. It just makes me wonder how many years I have to wait to find out why.”

In the darkness beside her, Jiejie sighs, withdrawing her hand. “Yeah…I know.”

Melinda decides to push her luck. "Are you still an agent?"

But Jie shakes her head above her. "Can't tell you that."

"Are you married?"

"Has any Melinda ever answered that question?"

"Are Mom and Dad okay?"

"…Yeah."

"What about Carolyn? Phil?"

"They’re fine. Now go to sleep, Meimei. You'll only go on that field test if you pass your physical on Monday.”

“Don’t tell me what to do,” Melinda mumbles as she turns over, her back to the woman so that she’s not breathing on her all night. She drifts off to the feeling of someone drawing soothing circles on her back, and she can hear a smile in Jiejie’s last whispered words.

“I am the only one who tells you what to do.”
September

September 2013: Skye is 23, May is 44

It’s been two weeks since Peru, and May has continued to keep her distance.

It’s a *plane*, so of course they’re crossing paths occasionally, though less than seems normal to Skye. In the common areas, where May slides through like a shadow, silent and dark, never staying long; in the cargo hold, where she always seems to be leaving, a workout finished, just as Skye stumbles in, bleary-eyed, for morning drill with Ward; even once in the bathroom, an encounter that had surprised Skye so much that she had actually dropped everything in her hands (just a towel and shower kit, thank God…). Not a single word had been uttered by May in any of those instances, but Skye had been consistently thrown into awkward silence, having simultaneously everything and nothing to say.

It’s exhausting, but Skye has been doing her best to keep her mood up in front of the others, to make it look like she’s enjoying her time with the team and not aching for something that technically doesn’t yet exist. The others do not seem thrown by May’s silent presence, which makes Skye think that this is how May has been for a while…or that the others don’t know her at all.

Coulson told her to *ask* if she wanted to know something, but she hasn’t yet worked up the courage to voice her frustration, not even to him. The closest they’ve come to speaking about the situation is a silent exchange of raised eyebrows and quiet nods, which Skye interpreted to mean that he had delivered her note, like he promised he would.

She guesses that for now, that’s the best she can do.

Training with Ward is miserable at moments, but still exciting in its own way. Their days on their repaired plane have so far followed an irregular pattern of flights and pit stops, but Skye’s daylight hours have been filled with regimented training, courtesy of the resident Robocop. Every day, she ends her morning drill with aching muscles before joining the science kids for breakfast (May and Coulson seem to always have finished long before the rest of them). Ward usually gives her bookwork for the morning, which she is allowed to complete in any corner of the plane that she wants to (unfortunately, it seems like none of those corners are the places where May is hiding). In the afternoons, there is more strength training, weapons training, gear training, then self-defense training. Why Ward waits until she’s at her most tired to start the last lesson is beyond her. By the time they end for the day, she’s barely got enough energy to keep up a conversation with Fitz and Simmons while eating before curling up in her bunk with her laptop to unwind until she falls asleep.

She keeps her promise to Coulson about not hacking into SHIELD to learn more about May, but one of Ward’s first assignments was to read the files of everyone on the Bus.

“You need to know everyone’s strengths and weaknesses before a situation exposes them,” he had said, flipping open his own file to show her the layout. “Medical history, education, field experience, special skills, public image, personal notes…” Skye was barely listening, already pulling May’s file out of the short stack and flipping it open. She is surprised to only see two sheets of paper inside.

“I thought May and Coulson were seasoned agents,” she said, scanning the information. It was basic at best. “Why are their files so thin?”

“These are the Level One-access versions of everyone’s files,” he explained, pointing to the red LEVEL 1 stamp at the top. “That’s what Coulson gave me permission to give you. You can know as
much about each of us as any rookie SHIELD recruit. Anything more that you want to know, you have to get directly from the source. This is more than enough to get you started.”

Skye had tried not to let her disappointment show, but it doesn’t stop her from holing up in her bunk for the rest of the morning and immediately cross-referencing everything she could over the Internet.

*It’s not digging if it’s public information…*

The mug shot in May’s file is your basic DMV non-smiler. May’s hair is shorter than she’s used to seeing it, and Skye can see the collar of an Oxford shirt peeking up into the picture. More business-professional than Skye has ever seen her dress (*then again, May was never wearing her own clothes when she visited…*).

Reading the file, Skye found herself barely able to get through a single line without needing to pause and re-calibrate everything she thought she knew about the woman.

**Melinda Qiaolian May**

Something about reading May’s full name for the first time makes her hands tingle. Of course she’s wondered about it, had even asked multiple times over the years, but May had remained persistently mum about her full name. About almost everything personal, really.

*It’s almost like she knew I would grow up to become a hacktivist…*

She thinks back to that first memory of May, of the woman reading her a book on the back porch. “You can call me May,” the woman had said. Her whole life, Skye had just assumed it was her first name. Now, at last, it’s all right here.

**Melinda Qiaolian May**

**DOB: September 2, 1969**

*Happy late birthday, May…*

She does a quick Internet search and finds the public birth record.

**Anaheim, California.**

**Parents: Wenbo Mei and Lian Mei**

**Doctor: Joseph Kierkegaard**

*California…*

She goes back to May’s file.

**Education: SHIELD Academy class of 1992, Operations**

**George Washington University (SHIELD concurrent enrollment), class of 1991, BA International Studies**

**Independence Charter High, Philadelphia, class of 1987**

Skye finds the public lists of alumni of the listed high school, and sure enough, there she is in the digitized yearbook files.
Summa cum laude

Cross Country State Champion, 1986

Seventeen-year-old Melinda May had soft cheeks and a bob with bangs. Skye saves that picture to her computer and grins to herself. May's seen her go through all her awkward teen styles and unfortunate haircuts, so really, this is only fair.

Marital status: divorced, 2009

She can’t find anything online about a divorce using May’s full name, but Skye is able to find an archived marriage license issued by the state of Maryland in 2007. It’s SHIELD-redacted, blacking out her husband’s name and signature, and Skye guesses that makes sense. Wouldn’t want your agents’ family members to be targeted...

Service Record: Agent of SHIELD 1993-present

Operations (Specialist): 1993-2008

Administration: 2008-2013

Special teams: 2013-present

Academy Instructor: 1997-2008, on call

Supervising Officer: Victoria Hand, 1990-1994

Special Skills:

Pilot: re-certified 2013, all SHEILD-issue fleet

Aviation technician: re-certified 2013

Languages: Mandarin, Cantonese, Russian, Spanish

Honors:

Commendation for Distinguished Service—2008

Medical notes:

Weakened ligaments on carpals/metacarpals, left wrist

1996—Broken right ulna, broken phalanges—fourth and fifth fingers, right hand

1998—Mid-shaft fracture, fifth metatarsal, left foot

2001—Emergency surgery for knife wound to abdomen

2004—Broken right clavicle

2008—Bullet wound, right calf, lasting nerve damage observed in heel and fifth toe
Jesus, May, and this doesn’t even include the injuries you’ve shown up with in my past/your future…

But then she reads the most recent note on the list, a word that she doesn't know.

2009—Hysterectomy

Worried that it might be a term related to the chrono-displacement, Skye opens her dictionary app. The definition appears, and she suddenly feels sick.

Oh. So that’s what she was talking about…when you were 10 and you asked if…

And this was 2009, the same year that she…Oh.

Oh.

…Oh, no.

She does not even hear the voice on the other side of her door until the person adds knocking on top of it.

“Skye?” Ward’s always-impatient voice filters through her door. Skye’s eyes fly to the clock on her laptop.

Shit.

“Just a second!” she calls, shutting her laptop with a loud pop and shoving it and the files under her pillow.

“I’m going to make it thirty pushups for every minute you’re late if you don’t get your ass out here right now.”

She scrambles for her tennis shoes and tries to forget about the files for the rest of the afternoon.

Her first mission at Quinn’s villa in Malta a few days later is, in own her eyes, an absolute train wreck, but no one scolds her about her performance later—in fact, Simmons won’t stop chattering about how well Skye handled herself, and Fitz only makes one comment about the earpiece she wasted in a flute of champagne. Ward grudgingly concedes that she stayed exceptionally calm throughout, and Skye even notices May watching her carefully as she comes back onto the plane, soaked and shell-shocked, but aside from the directions communicated during the mission, they have still said nothing to each other.

It doesn’t seem like an accident, however, that the next mission they are called to, Coulson takes her and May in the SUV together, leaving Ward and the science team with the plane while May drives them into the city.

“All right, campfire time,” the man says suddenly as they sail down a highway towards the station in Stockholm where the briefcase full of diamonds was stolen. He turns slightly in his seat to look at both of them in turn—May in the driver’s seat, Skye hunched in the back seat directly behind her, where it felt like she would be the least obtrusive. “The two of you are going to have to talk to each other eventually. Agent May, you got your wish and are back on the field guarding my careless ass, so the two of you are going to be working together now whether you like it or not.”

Skye’s eyes dart to May, but she has not reacted whatsoever, her hands steady on the wheel, foot firm on the gas, eyes fixed straight ahead.
Undaunted, Coulson continues, his tone still strangely light but weighted with authority. “Now, there is enough of a question mark over this…situation…without me getting involved, but the two of you are both my responsibility and report to me, so I want to make sure I am perfectly clear about my expectations. This is the only time I will say this: you are teammates, and the safety of your team is priority one. If we run into any situation that demands one of you to work with, protect, or help the other, you will do it without hesitation. If this tension between you causes avoidable damage or injury to anyone or any situation, I will drop both of you in the Cage together until you work this mess out, or until only one of you comes out alive. Is any part of that unclear?”

Skye is completely overwhelmed but manages a silent shake of her head.

May actually speaks, a quiet grumble. “Understood.” Her eyes remain on the road.

“Good,” Coulson says brightly, facing the front again. “Now, you two have been pretty icy to one another so far, but unless you want the team to get suspicious, you need to figure out how to talk to one another like the strangers you are supposed to be. Why don’t you both get a little practice in today as long as we’re alone together?”

They’ve reached the subway station. May pulls the car into a parallel spot on the street, but Skye is out before she’s even put the car in park. She takes a few gulping breaths of the wet, Scandinavian air, stuffing her hands into her pockets to calm their shaking.

Coulson is at her side before she calms, his voice gentle.

“Go easy on her, Skye, but go easy on yourself, too,” he whispers, and steers her gently towards the station entrance.

As the two seasoned agents talk through the specifics of the heist, Skye does see a subtle change in Agent May. It almost looks like active relaxation. As she talks through the mission, she keeps her eyes almost exclusively on Coulson. He seems to have a steadying effect on her.

**Interesting.**

“It was just one thief: a woman,” Coulson says. “And she did it all with her eyes closed.”

“I have a pitch,” Skye offers cautiously, “but it’s way outside of the box.”

“I live outside of the box,” the man responds, not needing to glance at May for them to all know what he’s thinking.

“There are people in the world with superpowers, right?” Skye begins excitedly, continuing even as she sees May’s eyes flick anxiously towards Coulson. “…What if this woman had ESP or something?”

“There are no credible studies that support precognition, telepathy, or ESP,” May says boredly, the condescension just barely discernable.

Skye shoots her a frustrated look. “Interesting. You know what else there are no credible studies on? Time travel. I would know.”

*Focus on the mission, you two,* Coulson exhales as May’s glare intensifies. “There has to be a more obvious answer.”

Skye puts herself in time-out, helps them find a picture of their thief, and they move on.
May seems more than a little frustrated by the off-book mission to take in Amador, Coulson’s old protégé, but Coulson is firm about playing this as a hostage extraction, not an assassination.

“There are only a few women in the world that could pull off something so impossible,” he says patiently to May. “Since you were on the Bus, I figured it had to be her.”

Skye doesn’t miss the way May’s expression softens the tiniest degree at those words.

*Interesting.*

They get through the rest of the mission without any more passive aggression towards one another. May takes off to take on Amador alone (*ninja know-how, told you so…*). Skye rigs a set of X-ray glasses, Ward completes the mission, Dr. Simmons works her medical magic, and Amador is safe, minus an eye.

Coulson sits in the back of the SUV with Skye that night, agreeing that it’s kind of appealing to stay in the smaller space of the car within the small space of the plane.

“It’s more peaceful here,” Skye says quietly. “I liked my van so much because it was a contained space that was mine and no one else’s, which I’d never had before. It was the one place where I made the rules.” She stares up at the car’s interior and thinks of her van, the last people to ride in it with her, and the way that all ended.

*I thought I could make the rules…*

“May will come around, Skye,” Coulson assures her gently. “You know that it will happen. She’s just a historically slow mover in nearly everything.”

“Is there something going on between you?” Skye hears herself asking before she realizes what she’s saying, cringing and wishing she could reel the words back in.

She thinks she can hear a smile in Coulson’s voice. “Only her constant exasperation with nearly everything I do.”

“Was there ever…something?” She feels his gaze, and she looks over at him. “What? You said to *ask.*”

He smiles a little and tips his head back up towards the ceiling. “There was never the kind of something that I think you’re imagining. But I think you know more than most about relationships that fall in more than one category…or none of the above.”

Skye bites her lip and closes her eyes.

It helps and hurts to know that he *does* understand.

“It’s just…I feel like I can’t *miss* her, because she’s *here.* But the May I knew…” She lets the last words go unspoken.

His sigh seems impossibly heavy for how quiet it is. When Coulson speaks, it sounds like words dug up from a grave.

“I know exactly how that feels.”

Skye looks over at him. “Can you tell me that story?”

“Another time,” he promises. “Not yet.”
May still avoids Skye like the plague.

The next time the team stands around the holocom, someone mentions the Gifted Index, and half the people in the room fight the urge to shift uncomfortably.

“Are you saying there are more people with powers?” Skye breathes, looking across the table at May.

“Not many,” the woman says, her gaze cold and threatening.

“Well enough to keep a list!” Skye snaps back, not trying to hide her shock.

I always assumed May was the only one…

“In rare cases, SHIELD has had to take action,” Ward says.

“Actions against objects? Or people?” She can’t help looking at May, who holds her gaze steadily, though it seems like she’s forgotten to glare. Seems a little more like she’s thinking about something else.

The agent in Hong Kong explains that the Gifted was taken by professionals operating under information provided by the Rising Tide, and five pairs of eyes turn on her. After assuring Coulson of the truth (I had nothing to do with this!), Skye offers to trace the hack. When she sees Miles’s picture come up on their holocom, she has a sick feeling that she knows what’s coming.

She texts him before she, Ward, and Coulson leave the plane.

She meets him in his house to make sure he’s safe, indulges him (and herself) with some private time. Later, as she searches for her clothes, Skye’s stomach threatens to fall out through her feet when she opens his bedroom door to find Agent May on the other side, holding her shirt out to her.

Ironic, really. It’s almost always been the other way around.

“Get. dressed.”
September 29, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 23

This wasn’t exactly how May expected her day to go.

She had been surprised (to say the least) when Coulson had ducked into the cockpit before landing, asking her to tail Skye once they left the plane to track down the hacker.

“It was obvious that she knows him personally—it could be nothing, but I don’t want to ignore it if it’s something.”

“I thought you trusted her?” May had said, flipping the switches for flaps as they started their descent into south Texas.

“You know it only extends so far,” he said, dropping into the co-pilot’s seat and buckling for landing. “I want to trust her, and I know that’s not the same thing.”

“Coulson, you know she’s going to notice me tailing her,” May protested as she guided the plane in a gentle descent towards a private airstrip just outside of the Austin metro area. “Have you not seen the way she watches my every move? Switch your Specialists—let me chase the guy; let Ward follow her.”

“Ward stands four inches taller than half the population of this state,” Coulson said patiently. “She’d notice him right away. And besides, I know that when it comes to sneaking around unnoticed, you’re the blackbelt on this plane.”

May had let him see her roll her eyes. “When I said I was finished running back-end…”

“This is front-end, May. You know that. Besides, I thought you were dying to find a reason to prove me wrong.” He glanced over at her as they came into a vertical landing on the diminutive airfield. “Take handcuffs, and I’ll hope that you don’t need to use them.” He unbuckled as soon as they touched down, getting out to the cargo hold well ahead of her.

“Are you sure about this?” she asked as they stood at the upper level in the cargo bay, watching Skye head out for the Internet café.

“No,” he’d said, “but do it anyway.”

May had obeyed.

And now, after casing the house from the outside, setting a trip wire outside the front door after the young man had gone in, and slipping through the same back door that she’d seen Skye dart through a few minutes before him, she only needed to hold her breath for a few seconds to hear confirmation of what she suspected.

*Hardly seems worth the risk of losing your chance with SHIELD,* May had thought, almost disappointedly, as she texted Coulson the address and waited out the conjugal visit in the kitchen.

When Skye opened the bedroom door a few minutes later and froze, wide-eyed and half-dressed,
May felt like she should feel relieved. *Here it is, the smoking gun, the irrefutable evidence that this girl is not trustworthy...* But there is also something else in Skye’s expression, something unsettling.

She immediately looks unsurprised by this turn of events. Resigned. As if she knew this was how it would happen.

“Get. dressed,” May orders, and Skye moves, seemingly without thought, taking the shirt from May’s hand and starting to pull it on immediately.

May pushes past her into the bedroom and has the cuffs on the boyfriend’s wrists before he can even get a complete sentence out.

“Wait a second, isn’t she—”

“Miles don’t say anything,” Skye blurs, her hands visibly trembling as she rebuttons her shirt.

May forces the young man to sit down on the bed, but he is too distracted to resist, staring at Skye.

“Are you kidding me, Skye? She’s SHIELD? All this time and you—"

“Miles, shut up!” There is desperation in Skye’s voice now, her eyes frantic as they dart between the two of them. “And don’t fight her. For God’s sake, don’t fight her. You’ll lose a limb.”

“You sit there and don’t move,” May orders the boyfriend as he glares up at her, responding to him with the same glare that makes Level 6 agents take two steps back. She turns to Skye. “Living room.”

The girl moves obediently into the other room, and May stands between her and the front door.

“Sit.”

Skye lowers herself onto the sofa, glancing towards Miles, who is clearly giving her daggers from the next room.

May pulls out her phone and presses the beckoning signal. The team is parked just around the corner, waiting for her to give an all-clear.

“Coulson will be in here in less than one minute. Do you have anything you want to say before then?” She has no idea why this is the question that she asks, but the words are out before she can think twice.

The hacker looks steadily at May, chewing her lip. “I know what this looks like. But it’s not what you’re thinking.”

“What am I thinking, Skye?” May challenges, folding her arms and wondering when the last time she said the girl’s name was.

Skye stares up at her, pushing her chin out defiantly. “That you were right all along and you’ve finally got a good reason to get me off the plane.”

May raises an eyebrow. “And how do you expect me to believe that this isn’t exactly what it looks like?”

It almost seems like Skye is trying not to smirk. Her voice is low, too low for Miles to hear, as she responds, “Because everything you’re pretending doesn’t exist…it already happened. You won’t get rid of me that easy. And I know you know that too.”
The front door opens, and Coulson is striding in. May meets his eyes and tries to look apologetic. She fails.

“You take the boyfriend,” he orders May before he faces Skye. May waits until she sees Ward come in—stowing her trip wire, covering the exit as Fitzsimmons shuffle in behind him—before moving back towards the bedroom and shutting the doors.

The kid waits all of two seconds before he says anything.

“So are we just going to pretend we haven’t met? Is that how this works?” he asks from his spot on the edge of the mattress as May turns around and steps in front of him, studying his face.

“Who’s pretending?” she responds dryly, though she has a bad feeling about where this is going.

Miles raises his eyebrows. “You think I don’t remember you? Skye’s friend, the one who disappeared out of a windowless room? Who would forget a thing like that?”

Melinda holds his gaze, not letting her features mirror the slow drop in her stomach. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she says evenly.

The young man rolls his eyes. “K, if that’s the way you want to do it...except I know you’re full of it. That day back in ’09 when Skye and I were living in that shitty apartment uptown and I came home to find you and her on the sofa talking? You looked right at me and said, ‘Oh, hey, Miles,’ like you’d met me before. And not even a minute later you got up and went in the bathroom and never came out. Skye went in later when you didn’t answer and came out with your clothes.”

He pauses like he’s waiting for May to say something. She stares steadily back at him, unblinking.

“Seriously, none of this is ringing a bell?”

“Why don’t you tell me something I’d actually like to know?” May returns, folding her arms across her chest. “The classified information you stole from us. Who did you give it to?”

“See, here’s the thing that makes no sense,” Miles says, completely ignoring her question, “If you’re SHIELD, and you’ve known about Skye and I for years, what’s with the COPS drama? It’s almost like you don’t want anyone to know that you’ve seen me before.”

“I haven’t,” May says levelly. “You’ve got the wrong woman.”

The boy rolls his eyes. “Whatever lady. I knew she’d find you someday. If you’re SHIELD, I guess that explains why it took her so long...your fingerprints wouldn’t be on file, you’re probably a pro at dodging cameras, you would never have been in a public hospital with those injuries she’s seen you with...But Skye’s good. I knew she’d get you eventually. Never thought there would be handcuffs involved, though...”

“Start telling me what I want to know or they’re going to stay on a lot longer,” May threatens, edging close enough and setting her stance in a way that he’s sure to see as threatening. “What happened to Mr. Chan?”

“I have no idea who that is.”

Coulson opens the bedroom door.

“Anything?”
May shakes her head.

“Gather all the evidence and secure the prisoners. We got what we were looking for here. We’re going to Hong Kong.”

May grabs Miles by the shoulder and hauls him to his feet. She doesn’t look at the sofa as she marches him through the living room towards the front door. She got her wish, and Ward is left with Skye.

---

**Skye:**

For the second time in barely a month, Skye finds herself marched onto the team’s plane as a prisoner. There isn’t a bag over her head this time (Miles gets one), but the routine is the same. She’s frisked before the ramp (by May) before she’s marched straight to the Cage. This time, however, she’s handcuffed to the table across from Miles, who is led in by Ward.

When May leans over her and buckles a seatbelt across her lap, Skye inadvertently catches the scent of her hair, a memory trigger that sends emotions and sensations racing through her system. She breathes slowly and closes her eyes.

*Why does it have to be this way?*

Ward buckles a seatbelt on Miles and pulls the bag off his head. He blinks against the onslaught of light, swiveling his head to watch Ward and May as they move towards the door.

“See you two in Hong Kong,” Ward says coldly, leading the way out. May follows right behind him, not looking back.

The door slams, and Miles looks pointedly back towards her.

“Don’t say anything,” Skye says quietly, looking away as she hears the turbines start to churn and the stomach-swooping sensation of a vertical takeoff.

Her heart is still racing, trying to absorb the possibilities. *This can’t be the end,* she reassures herself. *This can’t be the last day you spend with this team.*

May had told her once that her trips to Skye’s childhood hadn’t started until the two of them had known each other for months, and it’s barely been a month at this point. If she were to get booted off the plane now, and May were to never see her again, she doubts those visits would have ever happened.

On top of that, they still don’t have anything close to the kind of relationship May had always referenced in their future. She had said they were something special, though the words used varied throughout the years.

*Friends,* she had promised for most of the younger years.

*Close,* she had said when Skye got older.

*Not that,* she had patiently denied when Skye was a teenager, denied nearly until the end.

*Just us,* she had said on the last visit. *Meeting you is the beginning of us.*

So...this can’t be how everything ends.
She warned you that it would be a slow start, a rough start.

I guess I didn’t realize how that would be both of our doing.

The problem is that Skye has no idea how she’s going to get out of this one. Coulson has every right to be mad at her, and she won’t be surprised if he grounds her to a SHIELD detention facility and strips her of any access to the information she’s been chasing for years.

He gave you a chance. You should have been honest.

Way to blow another chance at a family, Skye. Well done.

Miles gives his cuffs a yank. They hold soundly to the metal of the table. “So I guess due process isn’t really SHIELD protocol?” he mutters, glancing up at her.

“They don’t have time for it,” Skye snaps, looking away.

“Wait a second, are you defending them?” Miles says disbelievingly. “These people are denying us our basic rights!”

Skye rolls her eyes. There was a time not so long ago when I said something similar to the same people. She remembers Mike Petersen and the way Coulson gave her a chance to do the right thing.

“This isn’t about us,” she pushes back. “They’re trying to save someone’s life!”

Miles looks scandalized by her defense. “Listen to yourself. That’s what they always say to justify invading privacy, Skye. These people stand for everything we despise. Secrets, censorship…”

“Just shut up!” Her voice breaks a little on the middle word. She swallows, looking away.

Miles is quiet for a moment, but when he speaks, his voice is gentler. “Why didn’t you tell me she was SHIELD?”

Skye’s eyes fly back to his. “We are not talking about this here. There’s a camera in the corner.”

“Skye, if she knew I was your boyfriend, why didn’t she say something before they let you sneak away?” Miles looks more confused than anything else.

She stares him down, shaking her head. “She’s never met you before, Miles. You’ve got the wrong woman.”

“Come on. I did what I could to help you find her, Skye. You think I didn’t keep scanning her fingerprints every few months, just to see if she’d been added to the system since the last time I checked? You think I didn’t look at that picture too? The one you ran through every database we could get into? I wouldn’t forget her face. You think I don’t remember the way you cried that day after she left—”

Skye raises her foot under the table and kicks him as hard as she can. Miles swears and twists in his chair, wincing in pain.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says firmly. “I don’t know the woman who’s flying the plane. And she doesn’t know me. End of story.”

May:
He’s sulking when she gets to his office.

“Go ahead. Say it,” he grumbles.

“I don’t do petty,” May reminds him from the doorway.

“But you called it,” Coulson says, slumping further in his chair. “I trusted my gut …even though you said she was a risk.”

“When someone breaks into my house, I usually don’t invite them to stay,” May says with a shrug as she steps fully into the office. “But that’s me.”

Meaning it’s usually myself breaking into my own house because the universe dropped me naked outside of it in the middle of the day, but I’ll let you read that line however you want…

Coulson reaches for his tablet and touches the television controls. The security feed from the Cage fills the screen on his wall.

"You should probably see this before I delete it."

He presses play. The boyfriend is talking.

“One I did what I could to help you find her, Skye. You think I didn’t keep scanning her fingerprints every few months, just to see if she’d been added to the system since the last time I checked? You think I didn’t look at that picture too? The one you ran through every database we could get into? I wouldn’t forget her face. You think I don’t remember the way you cried that night after she left—“

From the angle of the camera, they can’t really see Skye kick him, but his reaction makes it clear that she does.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know the woman who’s flying the plane. And she doesn’t know me. End of story.”

Coulson touches the tablet again and the picture disappears. May continues to stare at the screen, unmoving.

“What is your gut telling you now?” she asks calmly even as her stomach twists into tighter knots.

She feels his gaze on her.

“That she’s still hiding something.”

Skye:

They do the right thing, but they don’t get to save a life this time.

Instead, they are standing outside watching a fireball that was once a man bloom upwards into the night, safely away from civilians but leaving more than one person in the building dead by his hand.

Coulson seems to be the most disappointed by the way it ended.

“You can’t save someone from themselves, sir,” Ward says quietly in his direction.

“You can if you get to them early enough,” Coulson replies, his eyes falling on Ward and then on Skye.
She wraps her arms around herself and looks away.

They ride back to the plane in silence, with Skye wondering at every mile if this ride is the last time.

They reboard the plane, and Skye watches as Coulson puts a cuff on Miles that sounds slightly friendlier than a shock collar, then lets him go, *now, please.*

“My office,” he orders as he passes Skye on his way up the stairs. The unspoken *Say goodbye* lingers in the air after him. Inside, she sighs with relief.

“So you plan to stay?” Miles asks, spinning the silver cuff on his wrist.

Skye nods. “If they let me.”

*They have to.*

Miles is watching her, almost sadly. “You’re not who you used to be.”

Skye thinks of the person she’s wanted to say something like that to for weeks and has barely been near enough to speak to.

Sometimes it helps, though, to say the right thing to the wrong person.

“You’re not who I thought you were.”

She turns away first, moving towards the stairs to the cabin level.

“I hope you find what you’re looking for,” Miles calls after her. “All of it.”

She bites her lip but doesn’t look back.

May and Ward are seated at the bar with half-full tumblers in front of them as she passes through the cabin towards the second staircase. May doesn’t turn around as Skye asks Ward if he wants to go into the conference with her, but Skye feels her gaze as she walks away.

Distantly, she wonders what Miles said to her and whether May believes any of it.

“Why are you here?” Coulson demands as she sits, repentant and silent, at his desk. “You’ve been keeping something from us this whole time. And it wasn’t just a boyfriend, it’s not just the person you found here—you have another secret, Skye, and one chance to come out with it. And that’s now, or I’m done with you.”

*Anything but that.*

She takes a deep breath. She pulls the SD card out of her shirt and holds it out to him.

*This is the rough start. This is how it happens.*

“What is this?” he asks as the card drops into his hand.

“It’s everything I have,” Skye whispers.

“On us? On May?”

Skye swallows. “On me.”
May:

She’s still at the bar with Ward when Coulson comes down a few minutes later without Skye.

“May--cockpit,” he says tiredly. “Bring the scotch.”

He’s already settled into the co-pilot’s seat when she comes in after him, a bottle hanging from one hand. She locks the door and doesn’t turn on the lights as she climbs into her own seat beside him.

“No glasses?” he asks as she passes him the bottle.

“No table,” she responds, reclining her seat as far as a pilot’s seat can.

The plane is parked in an unused tarmac at HKG as it refuels, so there’s no view worth looking at besides a blurry tetris of skyscrapers poking up from the distant downtown area. The bottle goes back and forth twice in silence before May speaks.

“What could she have possibly said to convince you to let her stay?”

He sighs, screwing the top back on the bottle and setting it on the floor behind his seat as he turns to face her in the darkness.

“Mel,” he whispers somberly, "she wasn’t looking for you.”

Chapter End Notes

I am so thankful for every one of you who are keeping up with this story. I’m having a blast writing, so thanks for reading.

Questions? Message me on tumblr
loved-the-stars-too-fondly
October 12-13, 2013: Skye is 23, May is 44 and 45

The days pass slowly, but they do pass.

Skye takes her punishment in stride and does her best to throw herself into training and studying in penance for her deception. Ward continues to give her the cold shoulder, saying no more than necessary when they are together (though he does increase her strength training assignments, she notices). Coulson does not seem to be intentionally colder, but she feels his disappointment when he looks at her, and it’s less painful for her to simply avoid him. May is the same as always—there, but not really there.

If the others are more distant after Austin, Fitz and Simmons—Jemma—push in closer throughout the following days. They never tell her that she doesn’t deserve the punishment strapped to her wrist (she has the feeling that these are the kind of fact-based thinkers who she will trust to never lie to her), but the two scientists assure her with quiet words and gentle teasing and small touches that they don’t hold anything against her. The two of them had never felt like a closed circle, but Skye is aware, with every interaction, that they are making the space between them just a bit wider, as if trying to make it clear that she is invited in, whenever she’s ready.

She’s read their files and memorized their qualifications, and though she has four fewer degrees than each of them, she finds the fit easier than expected. It doesn’t take Skye long to start spending more time in the lab during her free time, even though their desk chairs aren’t as comfortable as the sofas or her bed. Ninety percent of the time, she has no idea what they’re saying (partly from their vocabulary and partly from their accents), but she loves watching the two of them speak their own private language—as if they are one mind in two bodies. Skye doesn’t even mind smiling through Fitz’s clumsy attempts to flirt with her—it’s obvious that he can’t see for all the world that he’s made for the woman who’s been beside him for years.

Skye had once had that with Miles—the private language, the unspoken understanding—but even in the best times, something inside her had always felt wrong, ill-fit, like a book closed around a pen. Knowing that May was out there somewhere, living her own life with her own relationships and not knowing about Skye, had made it harder instead of easier for Skye to build new friendships and relationships. She had thought that if they turned out badly, then they would just have been a waste of time; if they worked out, then things would be weird when she finally met May.

Turns out, she hadn’t dodged that bullet anyway.

Miles had known about May, yes, but not about why she disappeared out of sealed rooms, or why Skye didn’t know where she was from, her age, her full name, her job, or anything else that could have helped them track her down. It had been easiest to say that May was an old friend who had...
stopped in for a visit a day in Austin, but Skye had had to concoct a story on the fly when Miles
catched her that night attempting to fingerprint the glass that May had touched that morning. He had
helped her as well as she had let him; he had tried to make her happy. But how could he, not
knowing the whole truth?

The two them had been something...something Skye had always known would not last forever. But
it had been nice, for that time, to feel something close to understood.

She sits in the lab and watches Fitz and Simmons move around each other, bright and strong and
burning like stars in mutual orbits, and tries not to feel jealous.

The days pass slowly, but they do pass.

They’re all getting better at communicating with one another (though it doesn’t seem like May
communicates with anyone besides Coulson if they aren’t on a mission), and even Ward has his
moments (moments) where he’s willing to relax around the rest of the team. They have their
moments together that remind Skye of various rotations of foster siblings through the years,
especially when Fitz and Simmons team up against Big Brother and he has no idea. When the two
Brits take turns pulling American accents imitating Agent Grant Ward who can shoot the legs off the
death at five hundred yards, she suspects they’re just doing it to make her laugh again, but it still
works.

If it weren’t for the cuff on her wrist reminding her that she is still half-prisoner, this plane and these
people might be starting to feel like a family. Like a home.

Two weeks after Austin, their plane heads to Pennsylvania to investigate a “really freaky death”
(policereport’s words, not hers), and Skye feels comfortable enough again to try yanking Ward’s
chain and pushing May’s buttons. They both tolerate her about as well as they used to.

“Seems to me,” says Ward as they stare at the levitating corpse in the woods, “like we’re dealing
with some freak natural event or a new high-tech weapon.”

“Or…” Skye leans in right behind May’s shoulder. “Could it be someone from your super-secret
Index?”

She gets the impression that May’s fighting the urge to elbow her in the gut. “There’s no one on the
Index with this type of power,” she says levelly, moving definitively out of Skye’s space, and Skye
makes herself roll her eyes, hoping that might make it hurt less, or at least look like it doesn’t hurt at
all.

But they’re all wrong. It’s not a Gifted, or a weapon, or a natural phenomenon that’s killing people
from within by electricity.

It’s a virus.

May:

She hates this mission. She hates when the villain is someone that she can’t see, or fight, or protect
anyone from. She hates recognizing that a person is part of the body count is simply because they
were just in the wrong place at the wrong time. And she hates knowing that someone died afraid.

SHIELD takes the crew of the fire station and the last fireman’s body to quarantine and orders her
team to fly the Chituri artifact to the Sandbox. The cockpit door cracks after they reach cruising
altitude, and Coulson leans over her shoulder.
“What’s our ETA?”

“3:47 West Africa time,” she replies. They’re already over the long stretch of blue between the continents.

“It’s going to be a long 4 hours and 23 minutes,” he sighs, looking at his watch.

She understands. She wants the infected cargo off the plane as quickly as possible, too.

“You want to tell me about your physical?” she asks, partly to distract him and partly because his health concerns are the kind of thing she’s supposed to know.

He makes some excuse about his physical therapist requesting it, an excuse that she doesn’t buy for a second.

“If something was wrong, you’d tell me, right?” she prompts. “It’s not like you haven’t seen my dirty laundry.”

He tries to smile. “Of course.”

Dr. Simmons’s voice comes over the intercom. “Sir, I’ve found something that I think you should see—could you come down to the lab?”

“I’ll be right there.”

He shuts the door behind him, May faces front again, and there are thirty-eight quiet seconds.

Then there is a tremendous thud just behind May’s seat, and her hands jerk involuntarily on the controls.

“Christ!” she snaps, as the plane pitches sharply, sending her stomach swooping even as she quickly levels the aircraft out again. Through the door, she can hear surprised exclamations from some of the team and hopes that she didn’t just send someone tumbling down the stairs. It’s what she’s hearing behind her chair that’s more important, though.

“Really?” her own voice exhales behind her. She glances back and sees herself climbing to her feet, leaning over the back of the pilot’s chair to check the control panel. “38,000 feet? Jesus.”

May had always wondered what might happen if she disappeared off the Bus while it was in flight (Would I reappear where the plane last was or where the plane is now?—she can’t think about that question too much or she feels physically sick...), but she had never considered that she might time travel onto the Bus at such a time.

Nice to know that’s a possibility. Glad at least that it was in here.

May triple-checks that the intercom is off and covers the mouthpiece of her headset. “There’s clothes in the—“

“I got ‘em,” the other Melinda says, already extracting the bundle of extra clothes from a cabinet near the door. She’s barely got the shirt on before there’s knocking on the cockpit door, which May hears the other woman quickly lock.

“May?” Coulson’s voice filters through the door. “Everything all right?”

The other Melinda tips her head towards the door as she pulls on the pants. “Nothing to worry about, Coulson. No need to be beside yourself.” Cockpits don’t have rearview mirrors, but May is sure that
the other woman is smirking to herself.

They both wait until they hear retreating footsteps and May has turned off her microphone completely before speaking again.

"I can't believe you said that," May says, glancing back at her counterpart as she slips a pair of flats onto her feet. "I'm so ashamed."

"Gotta take the chances when you can," the other woman says lightly, grabbing an elastic off one of the switches above May's head and pushing her hair into a ponytail. "Still not too many people to joke about it with."

“When are you here from?” May asks as the other woman climbs into the co-pilot’s seat, buckling the seatbelt. The clothes are black leggings and a gray SHIELD-issue t-shirt, the cheapest, least memorable combination May could get her hands on to stow all over the plane.

“November 2014,” the woman responds, slipping the co-pilot’s headset over her head. “Here?”

“October 2013,” May replies.

The other Melinda’s brow furrows, but then she looks pained and tips her head back with a sigh. "Did you just take off from Pennsylvania?"

“Yes,” May says slowly, letting her hear the worry. “We’re on our way to the Sandbox. Something I should know?”

The other woman closes her eyes and shakes her head. “There’s always something you should know.”


“I can go wait this out somewhere else if you’d prefer,” the other Melinda says tiredly. “I’ve already done this.”

“Then you know you’re staying in here and out of sight.”

A short moment passes in silence. May sighs and glances over at her older self again, noting the bruises lurking on her arms.

“Rough week?”

She shrugs. “Better than previous weeks.”

Great.

“So Skye’s been on the plane for what…a month and a half now?” the other Melinda asks, returning May’s gaze. “You still haven’t spoken to her?”

May looks away. “Only when I caught her with the boyfriend in Austin.”

The woman scoffs quietly as she looks towards the windshield again. “You have no idea how quickly you’re all going to forget about that.”

“Because she’ll do something worse?” May prompts.

Her older self looks over at her, regret flickering across her features. “She isn’t the person on this
plane that you should be worried about.”

May sighs. Another hint of the future…and that’s probably the best she’s going to get from her visitor.

“If you’re not going to give me details, why don’t you just give me a reason to give the girl a chance?”

The other woman’s silence is heavy with disappointment. “She’s already given you twenty-eight reasons, Melinda. You’re the one who’s being stubborn.”

May exhales slowly, willing herself not to get worked up. She keeps her eyes fixed on the sky ahead of them.

“How could this possibly turn out well?” she asks tiredly. “Don’t I have enough to worry about in the future without adding this?”

The other Melinda leans back in her chair, staring towards the ceiling. She seems like she’s debating saying something, and finally she sighs.

“Look, I know you’re scared about Phil, about what’s going to happen with him. I know you have yourself set on hating the girl because that makes it easier to keep her at arm’s length. But Melinda—”

the other woman looks directly at her, “there’s no time for this. Things are coming…things I want to tell you about but just can’t…and you can’t keep fighting yourself in addition to everyone else you’ll be facing. You don’t have the time for it. Or the strength.”

May looks over at her other self, a year away from now and clearly on the other side of harder days than these. The woman looks exhausted (her visitors almost always do), but concern covers all of her features. It’s the face a parent wears when they’re trying to convince their teenager to make good choices, the face of a teacher who is all too aware of the lies of their students, the face of a an abuse victim watching their abuser get too close to someone else. It’s concern and fear and disappointment and pain and compassion, all at once, and all impossible to put into words.

“I’m a disappointment to her, though,” May says quietly. “The person she knew growing up…I’m obviously not her. There’s no way to even begin anything when she expects me to be someone I’m not.”

“She expects you to be yourself,” Melinda says patiently, “not wall yourself behind silence and coldness.”

“I do that with everyone,” May says with a shake of her head.

“But you didn’t always.”

Those words sting.

“How could that possibly be in my future?” May asks slowly, doubting that she’ll get an answer. “Becoming something like I used to be? How could I possibly become the person that she remembers…when that’s someone I barely remember?”

But the other woman’s lips turn into a sympathetic smile as she responds, “Almost sounds like knowing her…loving her…will be the thing that makes all the difference, doesn’t it?”

May’s eyes fly to Melinda’s, feeling anxiety crowding into her expression, but the other woman just shakes her head, still smiling a little. “Quit pretending that you don’t know what that word means
anymore. You know you do. You’re only on this plane because of it. You already love these kids in your own way. Why is it so shocking that you might learn how to do it again?"

“Loving her in what way?” May demands. “In what way, Jie?”

But the other woman just shakes her head and faces forward again.

“You can keep fighting it, Meimei, but you’re just wasting your time,” she whispers heavily. “And like I said, there’s no time to waste.” She raises one hand, gesturing towards the speaker in the ceiling.

The intercom crackles.

“May?” From only one word, she can hear in Coulson’s voice that something is horribly wrong. “Hit autopilot. I need you in the lab, right now.”

May’s hand reaches for the autopilot switch immediately, but the other woman’s hand stops her.

“I got this,” the other Melinda says, meeting her eyes. “Go on. I’ll lock the door.”

May nods and hustles for the lab.

When she returns to the cockpit and knocks the secret knock she’d worked out with a Jiejie years and years ago, she pushes through the door roughly as soon as it opens.

“If you can tell me anything at all that will save Simmons’s life,” she says to the other woman, low and measured because that’s the only way she can speak right now, “now’s the time to say it.”

May watches herself nod, sad and resigned. “Go stay with them in the lab, and don’t leave until she asks you to. I’ll keep the plane on your course to the Sandbox and radio the nearest Coast Guard station and tell them to send a ship along your bearing. That’s all I can say, and that’s all you can do.”

________________________________________

Skye:

Skye is barely breathing, unable to process what she’s seeing and hearing.

Fitz and Simmons look the worst that she’s ever seen them, but they are holding it together by channeling everything into their hands, which are barely shaking. They move seamlessly around each other even as they move faster than usual, working like a well-oiled machine to create life out of death. Twelve hours ago, none of them knew that this virus existed. Now, they have only minutes left to understand it enough to conquer it. Skye stands with the older members of their team on the other side of the glass and prays to a God she doesn’t believe in as she tries not to look at the clock as it winds down.

The last rat gets the vaccine with five minutes left. Fifteen hopeful seconds pass before there is a zap of blue light, and its body begins to float.

The only two people who could do anything stand immobilized on the other side of the glass, equally powerless, and now out of time.

Skye can practically see the logical thought process sequence out of Jemma’s brain. The scientist moves towards the glass and straightens her back, raises her chin like the soldier she isn’t supposed to have to be. The tears cling stubbornly to her eyes as she speaks to Coulson.
“Sir, I know the protocol in these circumstances.”

Skye does too. She suddenly can’t find the air in her own lungs.

"...would you tell my dad first? I think that my Mum would take it better if it came from him."

"We're not there yet," Coulson says, his hand pressing into the glass, unable to reach to protect or comfort. "There's still time."

But Jemma doesn't accept anything other than facts. Not even at the end.

"Sir, please." Polite as ever, a thin layer of plaster over the fissure working through her.

Coulson meets her eyes. It’s a look he should not have had to see more than once in twenty-four hours. It’s a look he should not have to ever see again.

He nods.

Jemma faces the rest of them. One tear works its way towards her chin, which does not tremble.

“Would you mind if I had a brief moment alone with Fitz?” she asks, trying to smile.

Skye feels a gentle hand against her back, turning her around and guiding her away. She assumes that it’s Coulson until she sees him move in front of her. But she also knows that it’s not concern that makes May touch her now. It’s duty.

*The least we can do is give her what she asks for in her final moments.*

It only wrings her heart further.

The four of them climb the stairs and stand around the holocom seemingly out of habit. Agent Blake calls from the Sandbox, asking for an update on their infected cargo. May and Ward stall for Coulson. Their leader does not shake, but he can’t seem to move.

But then,

“Someone’s lowering the cargo-hold ramp,” May says, the closest thing that Skye has heard to panic in her voice.

Their pilot sprints towards the cockpit, and Skye and Coulson chase Ward back towards the lab.

She sees Fitz in the open cargo bay shouting about the vaccine working and struggling with a parachute, sees Ward snatch both and throw himself out of the plane after Jemma, who they already can’t see. Coulson shouts after them, looking more scared than she’s ever seen as he closes the ramp and radios May in the cockpit, yelling at her to turn the plane around.

Every person on this plane is doing everything they are able to do to save Jemma.

Skye holds on to the plane as it swings around because she can’t do anything but hope.

They race upstairs and crowd around the cabin windows as the plane punches through the clouds. May pulls the plane into a deep bank and they see an open parachute drifting slowly towards the sea, two figures hanging from it together. Fitz lets out a whoop when they both raise their hands and wave, and Coulson’s fist lands weakly against the cabin wall, relief radiating out of him. Skye exhales for the first time in half an hour and grabs Fitz into a mindless hug, screaming nonsense into his shoulder as the truth finally sinks in.
Whatever happens or doesn’t happen with May, this is still family. This is her family.

The one May always promised Skye that she would find.

May:

The other Melinda is still hiding out in the cockpit when they land in Morocco to pick Simmons and Ward up from the Coast Guard port that fished them out of the water. May brings her some food when she comes in to get them airborne and headed for the Sandbox again.

"You knew she would make it," she says accusingly to her older self as she pulls them up into the air.

The woman just smiles at the night sky ahead of them. "And now you know too."

This is always how it happens.

She goes up to Coulson’s office only after he’s done berating the two kids in the way only a terrified parent can, leaving the other Melinda dozing in the co-pilot’s seat.

“How was Simmons?” she asks, lingering in the doorway.

“Amazingly resilient. You’d never know she almost died.”

May stares at him until he tells her the truth about requesting a physical. He holds up the folder.

“This piece of paper is telling me that everything’s fine. But I don’t feel fine. I feel different.”

She’s glad he’s being honest, but also a little frustrated that he feels the need to explain that feeling to her.

“Take off your shirt.”

He shows her his scar, a vertical seam right above his heart. She presses her fingertip gently to it and reassures him with words she thinks he needs to hear, words to comfort him in his absence of all the knowledge that she’s keeping from him.

“…You died,” she says quietly, words that still ring with impossibility and pain, a combination of two simple words that she doubts have been often uttered in the English language. “There’s no way you can go through a trauma like that and not come out of it changed... The point of these things is to remind us that there is no going back. There’s only moving forward. You feel different because you are different.”

The hand holding his tie out of the way falls to brush hers gently. She still flinches, though not as badly as she used to.

“Take your own advice, May,” he says softly even as she steps back, deflecting any further touch and moving towards the door. “What’s the worst that could happen?”

When she gets back to the cockpit, it’s empty.

Skye:

She doesn’t want to leave Jemma’s side ever again, but Jemma finally insists that she is fine really,
Skye, and sorry for the thousandth time for scaring you, but I really just want to wash the seawater out of my hair and sleep for the next twenty-four hours, and I know you’ll be nearby thank you I’ll let you know if I need anything…

Skye is still too shaky to go to her own room, fluttering through the darkened common area with absolutely no idea how to come down from this adrenaline high. Ward is already in his own room, and Fitz is methodically preparing more “anti-serum” downstairs to send to the firefighters in quarantine. She sees May come down the stairs from Coulson’s office, heading back towards the cockpit, and Skye stares after her while the woman avoids her gaze as usual.

She considers going up to talk to Coulson herself but figures he needs his own alone-time after today. Instead, she turns to get her laptop from her bunk, the closest thing she has to a security blanket, even if it is constantly monitored through her bracelet now.

As she approaches her bunk’s door though, she sees through the frosted glass that the light is on, someone moving behind the door. Just as she opens her mouth to call to whoever’s inside, though, the door slides open a few inches and a familiar face peers out.

“Hey, Skye,” May says softly.

Skye freezes, her eyes widening, spinning to look back towards the cockpit where she definitely hears the sound of the door opening and closing.

Oh my god.

As she turns back towards her bunk, the woman on the other side of the door puts a warning finger to her lips, her own eyes darting towards the cockpit. And then she smiles as she steps back from the door.

Skye’s heart shudders. She takes two enormous steps forward, grabs the door handle, and slips quickly into her room. As soon as the door slides shut behind her, May’s hand reaches past her, throwing the lock in the door, and then Skye is in her arms.

“Oh my god…” she chokes out, pressing herself into every part of May that she can reach, squeezing her as tightly as she can as she feels relieved tears prickle at her eyes. “Oh my god, oh my god…”

“Shhhhh,” the woman hushes her gently, returning the embrace, though not nearly as tightly. “My twin sister doesn’t know I’m in here.”

“When are you here from?” Skye gasps out over May’s shoulder, not ready to let go yet.

“Next fall,” the woman murmurs, one hand smoothing gently through Skye’s hair.

“It’s that close?” Skye says disbelievingly, pulling back to stare at the woman as an amazed smile spreads across her face. “It’s coming that soon?”

May draws back and moves her hands to cradle Skye’s face, smoothing her thumbs over the stray tears on her cheeks as her eyes dart across her features, taking in every detail.

“That soon? When did you ever think a year was soon?” she asks, a smile pulling at her lips.

Skye just smiles. “When you made me wait two years to do this again.”

She leans in and kisses her.
May’s lips respond immediately, but her kiss is soft, verging on careful, and Skye raises her hands to clutch at the woman’s t-shirt, pulling her in closer to show that gentle is not what she wants right now. May indulges her, pressing in and briefly deepening the kiss, but then her hands eventually turn strong and gently hold Skye in place as she draws back.

“I don’t have much time left,” May says apologetically as her hands leave Skye’s cheeks to grasp at her sides, lower than feels innocent, but without pulling her closer. “Are you doing all right? After today, are you all right?”

“Today was a mess, but this team doesn’t have too many days like this, right?” Skye asks hopefully, still breathless from the kiss.

May only shakes her head. “Wish I could tell you that. But at least your unconventional family saved the day.”

“This is the family you were talking about, then?” Skye says, remembering the handful of references made by May to the people the two of them were with in the future. Now that she thinks about it, it would make sense if May had been dancing around the word “team” by substituting it with “family”.

“They’re really something, aren’t they?” May agrees, looking both proud and sad.

“You’re really something,” Skye says, grinning at May because she can’t not. “I think we’ve said ten words to each other outside of missions. I guess you think that avoiding me will delay the inevitable. But I think you’re just scared.”

“I’m an expert at lying to myself,” May says comfortingly, lips turning into an apologetic smile. “It’s nothing personal.”

Skye stares at her, doing a side-by-side comparison in her head. The May in front of her and the May she’s spent the last month with look nearly identical, but they still could not be more different. There are shiners on May’s face and bruises on her arms and she looks as exhausted as she always does when visiting, but there is some subtle difference, some dial inside of her turned one or two degrees, that makes everything about her seem…brighter.

“How is this possible?” Skye says, nodding to her hands, still clutching at May’s clothes. “You’re saying this is less than a year away…but how is that possible? I look at the woman on this plane now, and I look at you, and I can’t figure out how—“

“She’s on her way, Skye,” May cuts her off gently. She moves her hands to cover Skye’s and pull them off her clothes, bringing them together between their bodies and clasping them inside her own. “The person flying the plane now? She’s me, too, just a me that you don’t know yet--the me I was for years. But you’re here now, and the person in front of you is coming. It just takes time.”

Skye stares at her in disbelief. “What are you saying? That you’ve just been waiting on me? That I’m the secret ingredient?”

May shrugs with one shoulder, her thumb running gently over the underside of Skye’s right wrist, making Skye’s heart twist a little as she remembers why. “Of course I didn’t know I was waiting on you. Maybe you’re the secret ingredient or the final note in the equation...maybe you’re the catalyst, or maybe you’re just the spark. I still don’t know how to explain it, and I’m not great with metaphors, either.”

Skye feels herself grinning again. “So no pressure, huh? Wow. Well, how do I make you...you?”

May’s gaze is soft, her answer simple. “By being you. That’s all it takes. Just don’t give up on me
Skye tries to hold herself back, catches herself even as she starts to barely lean towards May, but of course the woman notices, and she doesn’t pretend otherwise.

“Come here,” she whispers and pulls Skye into her arms again.

Skye exhales into the embrace and melts against May’s body, rebuilding her memory of the firm muscle hidden beneath the deceptively soft skin, the shoulder that is low enough to press her chin into, the arms strong and reassuring around her. May tips her forehead against Skye’s temple and speaks somewhere near her ear.

“You had your whole life to learn to love me, Skye. Remember that. I may not have had as much to get through as you did, but the woman on the plane with you now has her own wells to climb out of. Be patient. She’s just starting to realize that she doesn’t have to stay down there.”

Skye nods, her throat closing up, the tears that have been lurking since metal things started floating around Jemma now back and demanding their own moment.

“I guess I just thought that…once I found you, it would be the end of waiting.”

She feels a suggestion of a laugh in May’s chest, and the woman pulls back to look at her again. “The best thing you can do right now is throw away any expectations that you have of a normal relationship. We’ll never have one. We do everything out of order, we never settle down, we’re rarely on the same page, we have the worst timing…but we have our moments.”

She suddenly leans forward and kisses Skye again, quickly but warmly, before stepping back. “I’m about to go,” she says apologetically. “I’m sorry I can’t stay longer.”

“What should I do with the clothes?” Skye asks quickly, raising her eyebrows and fighting the urge to grasp at May, knowing it’s so much worse to feel her disappear…

May reaches behind her and lowers herself onto Skye’s bed, her body tipping slightly even as she presses a hand against the mattress for support. “Keep them in here. You might need them again.”

She offers only hope, not a promise, but Skye still smiles. “I love you,” she whispers, unable to look away even as backlogged tears slip down her cheeks. May never says those words back, but Skye doesn’t need her to. The fact that she’s here says it all.

May raises her head, focusing her eyes on Skye’s.

“I’ll see you soon,” the woman whispers with a final smile.

And then there’s the familiar sound of air rushing in to fill an empty space, the clothes fall bodiless to the bed, and May is gone.

Chapter End Notes

If the end of this chapter took you by surprise, then I didn't do a good job as a writer. I did update the tags just now, but I didn't want to give anything away sooner.
These two have a long way to go, obviously, and a rough year ahead. We're in for a long, angsty ride to get from A to B (and we already know B to C has its own angsty-er events), but I wanted to go ahead and let you all in on what Skye already knows.

Feedback is always appreciated!
October 23, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 23

It’s taken two months, but May is finally willing to admit that her older self was right: she was ready to be out in the field again.

It’s not every day that a person gets to fly a plane to the frigid desert of Siberia in order to extract an agent who has been infiltrating the rebel army for months. Not every day that you and your fellow specialist get to sneak up on multiple well-trained guards and have the satisfaction of taking them completely by surprise. Not every day that you get to charge up a ladder and out into biting Russian wind, leap onto a dogsled, and get towed like a waterskier straight into the ramp of the plane that you get to take to the clouds only a minute later.

All in a day’s work for a field specialist, though. And May has missed it.

Simmons and Coulson handle the Agent Shaw’s physical workup and the other extraction (of his information capsule) while May gets their plane on a course for the Hub. The door opens before she’s turned off the fasten seatbelts sign, and she glances back to see Ward standing in the doorway.

“This one’s yours, right?” He’s holding up a thermos, the one that occasionally follows her around when she hasn’t gotten enough sleep. “Found it rolling around in the cabin area.”

May nods. “Thanks—you can leave it there by the door.”

Her words were chosen to give him an easy exit, but he lingers, barely stepping into the cockpit.

“So we’re really heading for the Hub?”

*Never pegged him as a chatty one.*

In two months, the two of them have barely spoken more than she’s spoken to Skye, and she has appreciated the silent understanding that lets them work well together but not really know each other. It would seem, however, that that’s not enough for him anymore.

“I’m really flying us to Finland,” she responds cautiously as their plane at last breaks through the clouds and into the all-encompassing sphere of blue hemming the earth. He’s still talking, though, spoiling her favorite moment of a takeoff.

“Have you been there before?” he asks, leaning back against the wall near the door.

A third question is excessive.

*He’s trying to get somewhere.*

May sharpens her tone just a little bit. “Of course.”

She doesn’t mention that she also time-traveled there last night and about had a coronary when she peeked out of the office window and realized where she was. The half hour that she spent hiding in a broom closet and praying that she wouldn’t have to disable some poor janitor had certainly been the low point of her week. She’d spent twice as long with her tai chi when she got back to the present,
making sure that she was as relaxed as possible before their mission began today. Even now, she’s hoping to sneak into her bunk later and do a little more before they land.

She almost jumps when she hears Ward open a cabinet behind her, the same one that her encrypted phone line and extra clothes are in.

“I’ll just leave it here,” he says, stowing the thermos and closing the cabinet door as May’s hands tighten unnecessarily on the controls.

“Do me a favor and go make sure Coulson washes his hands after he touches that memory card,” she says, letting grit edge into her voice.

*Beat it, kid.*

“Copy that,” Ward says coolly and closes the door behind himself.

May trusts Ward with the team. She trusts him to protect Coulson.

It doesn’t mean that she trusts him with a single one of her secrets.

When they reach cruising altitude and she makes it out to the common area, she sees the rest of the agents resting anxiously, waiting for Coulson to come upstairs. Skye glances up when May walks in (she always does), but her eyes drop immediately back down to the tablet in her hands. May still notices slightly less tension in the silence, and she’s thankful for it. Since the Sandbox, she has tried, really tried, to let herself relax more around Skye, whatever the circumstances. If the girl is still going to be in her life a year from now, this part, at least, she can try to get used to. It’s clear that the girl isn’t going anywhere, and May is tired of letting it ruin her day.

Coulson immerges from the cargo staircase with the intel from the agent downstairs, and Skye and the others quickly congregate to ask about the mission.

“Classified Level 8,” Coulson says kindly, and the words are a dismissal for all of them.

Skye, of course, has an opinion about this.

“This is usually where we stand around the holocom and learn about super-secret spy stuff…”

May feels herself open her mouth to respond with something condescending that includes reminding Skye that she’s not even a SHIELD agent and has been privileged enough to have been as much a part of things as she is, but then she stops herself.

Come on Melinda, you can be an adult.

She still reminds her of the truth. “Coulson’s got you used to the Bus, the way we do missions here. The Hub is different,” she warns.

Skye seems a little thrown by the direct response, but maybe it’s just the answer that throws her.

“The Hub? What’s the Hub?”

Walking off the plane in the Hub’s deep-well hangar feels a little bit like coming home, even if it’s not a place that May has (intentionally) spent much time herself. Fitz and Simmons are giddy with excitement, and Coulson is no longer the only one wearing a suit. May is surprised by how gratified she feels to see Skye blown away by the scale of the place, though she’s not sure if the girl’s eyes are bright with good ideas or bad ones. When she sees Skye whispering to Coulson though, she is pretty sure she can guess what it’s about.
When he had told her back in Hong Kong about Skye’s true purpose for hacking into SHEILD, May had, at first, been relieved. Skye wasn’t after her, wasn’t chasing her as a life pursuit. Knowing more about the girl, however, had made the guilt dig a little deeper when May saw the hurt in her eyes whenever Skye forgot to hide it. There’s still nothing May feels like she can (or should) do to help her with her search, so she had pushed the whole mess back into Coulson’s lap and told him to let her know if she was supposed to do something—otherwise, she said, it was his problem.

Coulson leads her and Ward into conference with Victoria Hand, and May tries very hard not to smile to herself when she hears Skye’s restrictor cuff catch on the magnet outside the door.

This is still her organization, not Skye’s.

Seeing her S.O. again should feel like a reunion, but Hand was never the affectionate kind of teacher—it’s what now makes her such an efficient commander. Coulson reintroduces May along with Ward, though May knows he has not forgotten that Hand once was to her what Director Fury once was to him.

Hand is not the kind to smile at an old student, but May sees the faintest lift of the woman’s chin in recognition.

*Long time.*

She lifts her own chin back.

*No see.*

Hand wants a two-man team across the border to secure the “Overkill” weapon, and May feels herself getting unreasonably excited. She and Ward exchange glances, both trying not to look too eager. But then Hand says she needs someone on-site to disable and disassemble the weapon, and May and Ward look at one another again, knowing there’s only one person on their team who fits that bill.

Ward looks like he’s just swallowed a bar of soap. “Do you mean…”

Coulson is smiling to himself, though. “I think she does.

**Skye:**

Watching Fitz struggle with a cart and an automatic door is nothing less than painful. Hearing that SHEILD is sending him in on an infiltration team is downright unbelievable.

“You *cannot* be serious.”

That seems to be everyone’s reaction to the news of who made first-string for the mission. Fitz, on the other hand, immediately puts on a brave face, and Skye has a feeling that he’s thinking that if his best friend can throw herself out of a plane to save five lives and his teammate can dive out of the same plane to save *her*, then the least he can do is disable a much bigger bomb to save even more than that.

All of Skye’s faltering protests about this selection seem to fall on deaf ears. Coulson tells her to trust the system.

May, of course, doesn’t say anything.
Before he and Ward leave, Skye gives Fitz a hug. Simmons gives him a sandwich. He tries to smile and tells them that he’ll see them in a day or two. They watch their guys leave, and Skye tries to trust Coulson even if she doesn’t trust SHIELD, but she can’t ignore the suspense lurking in her gut: none of this feels right.

SHIELD is restocking the Bus when Skye reaches the end of her very short rope and turns to the only Level 7 agent left on the plane. She’s feeling a little optimistic after catching a glimpse of May’s smile on the plane this morning.

“Fitz will be all right, won’t he?” Jemma is saying as she slips the “night-night gun” into her purse for safe keeping.

Skye sees a chance and takes it. “Well, Agent May is Level 7—maybe she can give us an update on their mission.”

In reply, May delivers her a fantastic non-expression. “We know what we’re supposed to know. When we have more information, we’ll react.”

Skye chooses to believe that it’s just a coincidence that the next thing May does is order everyone off the plane, saying she needs to “run diagnostics and reboot”.

Once they’re back in the belly of the Hub, Skye turns to Simmons.

“You guys may be okay with being in the dark, but I’m not into it. I need answers.”

She catches up with Coulson, but he brushes her off. “Trust the system,” he says again. Skye makes her way back to Simmons with her fists clenched in her pockets and a plan taking shape in her mind.

If they want the truth, they’ve got to get it themselves.

Simmons, of course, refuses to be a part of Skye’s “bad-girl shenanigans”, so Skye only feels a little bit bad when her line about Fitz possibly being tortured changes the scientist’s mind. They make a plan, an extremely simple one, and everything goes flawlessly…until Simmons has to try to lie.

It’s a bigger trainwreck than Skye’s first undercover mission. When Agent Sitwell goes down like a tree, revealing Jemma holding the night-night gun with a terrified expression on her face and an apology on her lips, Skye nearly drops the walkie.

“Oh my God!” she gasps, the only words she can get out as Jemma drags the man’s body out of sight in the hallway.

“How was that?” she scientist asks shakily as she dashes back through the door to Skye.

They have only ten minutes before the hack will expire. She can only think of one way for Jemma to get out of this.

“Go get May.”

She feels a little comforted that Simmons looks equally terrified by that order.

“May? Oh no no—“ Jemma stammers.

But they don’t have time for this.

“It’s okay, Simmons, May will know what to do, and she’ll keep you safe. She always does. She’s good like that.”
If Simmons hears anything strange in those words, it is swallowed up by her panic.

“Go get May,” she repeats, scurrying away as Skye grabs her laptop and bolts for an empty conference room. “Oh God, I’m going to be court-martialed!”

May:

The plane is empty, the maintenance is finished, and now May is rebooting.

Not her fault they thought she meant the plane.

She usually does her tai chi in the mornings, early enough to set herself on solid ground for the entire day, but nearly a whole day has passed since they arrived at the Hub, and she doesn’t want to risk anything…unplanned… happening until after they’ve gone.

In five years of time-travel, she has yet to find anything else that makes as much of a difference in her ability to stay in the present as tai chi. Something about the mental and physical awareness combined with active relaxation seems to ground her in her surroundings. She has never found a way to avoid traveling when nightmares carry her unarmed subconscious away at night, but the last time she time-traveled during her waking hours was already more than a year ago.

She keeps moving through the motions when Coulson appears and talks in her direction, stressed about the mission that Ward and Fitz have yet to return from. She lets her silence be her answer, responding only with warning cuts from her eyes when he gets close to breaking the protocols he’s committed to honor.

This team already toes that line on an almost-daily basis. He doesn’t need to add to it when they’re right under Hand’s nose.

“As long as you’re here and not speaking, then…” Coulson begins, and she casts him another warning glare as she changes position. He’s not letting this chance go by, though. “I got Skye’s file. It’s upstairs in my desk. I already read it, but I was hoping you could take a look at it too before we take off again. There are some things in it that we should…discuss.”

He leaves it there, standing up and moving out while dodging a final glower from her. May rolls her eyes and keeps breathing through her movements.

She brings everything all in and smooths it all out.

Why did he have to bring up Skye?

Up til now, she has dealt with the ton of bricks that Jiejie left her with on her last visit by actively not thinking about it—piling them in a dark corner and closing a door on them. Now, however, she feels the hinges of that door groaning with the exertion.

Loving her in what way?

There is no way that could mean what it sounded like it meant. There is no way that May is going to come to care about her…like that, not with everything that May has seen so far. Age difference aside, they are opposites in nearly every way, and Skye has done little to change her standing in May’s eyes as more than a reasonably useful wannabe agent. There seems to be a slightly bigger possibility that she could come to care for her as a part of the team, but May still isn’t sure that that is supposed to be a comfort to her.
“Loving her will be the thing that makes all the difference.”

What difference?

There had been something different about the self who visited the week before—May can’t deny that. The woman had still looked worn-down and war-weary, as May has noticed her selves usually did if they were visiting from after 2013. But the difference was still there, in every word and gesture: this woman had seemed more…secure. Tired but peaceful. Exhausted but unafraid.

**How can both exist at once?**

**How could both exist in me?**

At that moment, she hears scurrying, anxious feet on the cargo-level stairs. May doesn’t stop moving through her motions as Simmons sails into the room, every hair on her body trembling. “Agent May!” she cries, her voice singing with panic, and May wills herself not to react.

Someone’s in trouble.

*If this is about Skye, you’re on your own.*

It takes only a few lines of breathless stammering for the scientist to get it out.

“I shot someone.”

May drops her pose immediately, turning to face Simmons.

*Had no idea you had it in you.*

“Where’s the body?”

Chapter End Notes

We're not done with the Hub yet, don't worry. More missing-scene goodness coming in the next chapter.
October 24, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 23

“Simmons, what on earth possessed you to do this?” May breathes out as she stares down at an unconscious Agent Sitwell, drooling onto the tile floor of the broom closet where the girl had stowed him.

“I was obviously not thinking clearly or I would never have done this,” the girl stammers at a hundred miles an hour, her hands still shaking even as she grips the strap of her purse. “Of course I know that this is conduct completely unbecoming of an agent of SHIELD and I absolutely deserve any punishment that I’m going to get for this. I was just trying to put the flashdrive in the console like Skye said and then Sitwell was there and I was reaching for my badge and the gun was in my bag and he was about to call someone else on his radio--”

May had tuned her out two lines earlier.

Skye. This was Skye’s idea. Of course.

May lets out a slow breath and holds up one hand, and Simmons immediately falls silent. “Okay. We’re going to fix this,” May says calmly, even as the girl looks at her with alarmed eyes. “You are absolutely in trouble--don’t even think that you’re off the hook. But we’re going to try to make sure that I’m the only one you’re in trouble with.”

On the floor, Sitwell lets out a low groan and starts to move. May instantly snatches the gun from Simmons’ bag and fires a second night-night round into his back, and the man again goes limp on the floor.

May meets Simmons’s wide eyes as she sets the safety and drops the gun back into her purse. “You and I are doing weapons training the next time we have a free moment,” May says calmly. “First lesson will be how to set the safety on a pistol. Now stop gaping and help me lift this idiot into that rolling trashcan.”

Skye:

Coulson, of course, is nearly livid as he drags her through the Hub to a relatively secluded area, but Skye is out of patience, and it makes her bold.

“Why would you keep something like this from us? Does it not matter to you that our guys are out there without anyone coming to help them?”

Coulson has no gentleness left in his voice as he pushes her into another empty conference room and turns to face her. “I didn’t hide anything from you. You don’t have the clearance to know that.”

“Is that really what SHIELD is all about? Level 5 agents are less valuable than level 8 agents?”

“Skye, I have trusted you far beyond my own good judgment for months, giving you privileges that few agents of SHIELD have ever had, and you took advantage of that. You’re doing it again right now, and I can’t imagine how you expected this to end well. If SHIELD keeps a secret from you, it’s for a good reason.”

Skye raises her chin and stares him down.
She can see that he's trying to be The Boss right now. Not AC, not even “just Coulson”, but Agent Coulson, Level 8, Team Leader. Nevertheless, he's not fooling her. There is something haunted in his eyes as he says those words, something that makes her certain that he doesn’t believe them either.

Skye doesn’t back down. “On the plane, you’re always telling me to think outside the box, so I went off the book so that I can watch our guys’ backs. And don’t tell me that that’s not cool with you when it suits you—we have done nothing but go off-book since I joined up with you all. You have broken the rules for the people you care about again and again—May, Amador, me, Simmons—“

He cuts her off. “Our team can go off-book because there is a book. A Hub. An organization hat watches our backs. There is a way we do things, and it’s the only way an organization with so many moving parts can work well together.”

“I understand that, but –“

“Skye, you say you want to be a SHIELD agent, but you aren’t one yet. If you cannot commit to working within the policies and parameters of this organization, then I will tell May to drop you off at the nearest civilian airport, and you can head back to your van. But if you want to be a part of this, if you want to stick with us, it means being a part of this side of things too. Joining the organization means trusting its judgment.”

Skye takes a deep breath and forces herself to speak slowly. “Ward and Fitz are doing their part to save potentially thousands of lives. They’re not here to speak for themselves, but you and I both know that they did not go into this thinking that it was a suicide mission. You told me that the safety of our team is our priority, so who’s going to fight for them, Coulson? If you don’t protect your own, what’s the point of calling us your team?”

Coulson holds her gaze. “Careful with those words, Skye. I’m not sure if you’ve convinced me yet that you truly believe what you’re saying. Since the day you got on this plane, you have been here for yourself.”

Skye grits her teeth at those words. “That doesn’t change the reason why I’m still here.”

His gaze gets a little harder. “I know.”

He steps closer, lowering his voice to barely more than a whisper. “You are already in on the biggest secret that I know about, Skye, and you have kept it faithfully your whole life. I need to know, however, that if you were trusted with something dangerous that directly affected everyone around you, that you could keep a secret like that, too.”

He picks up her laptop and turns to go, but Skye has one last question.

“Did you know that there was no extraction plan?”

The silence before he speaks is her answer. “That’s classified.”

He leaves the room without another word, taking her laptop with him.

Skye lets out a frustrated sigh, grabbing fistfuls of her own hair and yanking hard, giving herself something to focus on besides the tension coiled around her chest.

*Why would he let this happen?*

*He can’t have known. He wouldn’t have allowed it.*
Clearly, he’s not allowed to help here.

*But May could.*

And May would.

She bolts from the empty room and hurries back towards the corridor where Jemma had shot Sitwell. As she rounds the last corner, she nearly collides with May herself, who is towing a still-frazzled Simmons by her purse strap.

Skye *almost* grins at the sight. “What did you do with--”

“Quiet!” May cuts her off in a voice that is absolutely a *snarl*, grabbing a handful of Skye’s jacket just behind her ribs and spinning her to march on her other side back down the hallway. “Not one word until we get to the hangar.”

Skye tries to tell herself that she is in *so much trouble* and this whole situation is *bad, bad, so horribly bad,* but she can think about is May’s hand pressing into her body and that it means *May is here* and *somehow, this is going to be okay.* Skye throws a glance towards Simmons and tries to look reassuring. It doesn’t seem to make any difference.

As soon as they enter the hangar, May steers the two of them roughly into an aisle between rolling utility shelves and spins them both to face her. She doesn’t have to touch them for Skye to feel like there is a hand closed threateningly around her neck.

“What was so goddamned important, Skye, that you would do something so stupid as to let *her* do something that stupid?” the woman demands in a low voice, putting her hands on her hips.

May’s eyes are boring into hers, that same suspicion and resentment that has characterized nearly every interaction they’ve had so far, but Skye isn’t afraid.

May’s not fooling her.

“There is no extraction plan for our guys, May,” Skye says bluntly. In her periphery, Simmons’s mouth falls open with a gasp. May barely reacts, but the tiny change in her eyes confirms what Skye already knew.

*This matters. We matter to her.*

“What are we going to do, May? How are we going to get them back?”

---

**May:**

*There’s no extraction plan for our guys.*

She hadn’t been expecting to hear that.

Her thoughts race down that fact to its natural conclusions: Ward is a Specialist; he was trained for this. He might get injured, but he could probably make it out of an armed assault with his life. Fitz, however—the curly-haired engineer that has already dodged bullets and been held at knifepoint once this year—if he gets hurt or killed, she’ll never forgive herself.

She’s not only on this team to protect Coulson.

Their reaction, really, is the only logical option.
“We won’t interfere,” May says, partly to herself, as she, Simmons, and Skye stride up the ramp of their Bus, their game-plan formed. “You don’t need a battalion for an extraction. Three can pull it off.”

Who am I kidding? You two will be sitting on the plane. One could pull it off. But I’m not leaving you here for Hand to court-martial.

A voice rings out from above them. “Four’s better.”

They look up and see Coulson waiting for them, a patient smile on his face and Skye’s laptop under his arm. May can see the girls grinning with relief out of the corner of her eye, and something in her heart swells with the closest thing to affection she has felt in a long time.

Skye’s question was had not been Do we do something? it had been What will we do?

The girl has known this team for less than three months, but she was already willing to risk everything for their guys. Simmons was willing to pull a trigger if it meant helping her find out the truth. May is willing to hide an unconscious agent in a stairwell, but Coulson’s prepared to go behind Hand’s back for all of them.

For some reason, May suddenly feels so proud.

She gets the plane in the air, and they head in.

---

Skye:

Ward and Fitz are alive and well. The mission was a success.

And Coulson got the document.

After everything else today, Skye knows she should be happier about the first two. But as she throws her arms around Coulson in joy and relief after he tells her the news, she knows that her emotion is at least a little justified. Her years-long search brought her here, and for the first time in forever, she has something new to go on.

“We don’t know if she was your mother, or if she just found you…” Coulson had said.

Mother, she thinks. Let her have been my mother.

It’s a word that she has barely let herself think about for years, and even then, only in the abstract sense. But now, she repeats it again and again in her mind until the word re-attaches itself to the boxed-up emotions tucked away in her chest. She lies down on her bed and pulls herself into a tight ball around the word, letting herself feel the denseness of hope at her core, like the center of a star. Warm and explosive and heavy and bright.

Mother. Mother. Mother. Mother.

And she might still be alive.

This team is the family she’s been waiting for—she knows that this is true. Somehow, getting on the plane with May to go save lives today—that was the part that felt like coming home today. But this word, this possibility, is still the reason she found herself here.

Let this go somewhere. Let this be good.
She knows better than to hope, but now it’s impossible not to.

She curls up tighter and lets the possibility set her ablaze.

---

May:

Coulson looks like he’s aged a few years since this morning when he climbs back up to his office. May is sitting in the chair in front of his desk, the unredacted file still opened in front of her.

The photos are gruesome. The black-and-white documents are chilling.

She doesn’t have any words for them yet.

“What did you tell her?” she asks, wondering if he had any words either.

Coulson sits down across from her at his desk. “The truth. I told her a SHIELD agent dropped her off at the orphanage.”

May looks at the photo of Agent Avery’s mutilated body. It’s not the only photo like it in the pile.

“But you didn’t tell her why.”

Of course he didn’t. Would you?

“I can’t,” he says hollowly. “Some secrets are meant to stay secret.”

She thinks of his TAHITI file, burned over her sink at home two months ago, and says nothing.

May reads the top document again, trying to keep the words at only surface level in her mind, but feeling them sinking cold through her anyway…

Mary Sue Poots

DOB: Unknown (est. 1989)

Parents: Unknown

Next of Kin: Unknown

Contact: Linda Avery

Status: ward of the State of Michigan

Caseworker: Tiana Thomas

Notes: Semi-annual interstate re-placement required—Witness Protection Program-mandated and federal government-approved.

“Will you help me find out what really happened?” His voice sounds tired, the kind of tired relieved by peace, not sleep. She looks up at him, and she can see that he’s already decided what he’s doing next.

If he’s going after a truth this dark, he can’t go after it alone.

“Dangerous waters,” she says slowly, “but I can try.”
He looks relieved, and she almost wants to correct his thinking, not let him believe the best in her.

She can let him think that she wants to do this for Skye, but the girl was never the mission.

These were never May’s orders.

When she curls into her bunk that night, her last thoughts are of the classified files she has held in her hands in the past year and how heavy they are all starting to feel.
Hi so clearly I cannot math, and I miscalculated a couple of date/age scenarios when I wrote some previous chapters. Basically, I should have set Skye's imaginary birthday before I started naming ages... But now we're settled-Skye first met May in the summer of 1994, not 1993. I did go update that chapter just now. (In case you're wondering, I headcanon her [incorrect] birthday as 11/11/1989.) Anyway, I had originally written this to be a tag on the last chapter, but Book_freak talked me into letting it stand alone. Hope you all enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

**September 28, 1999: May is 44, Skye is 9**

The room is shadowed as she opens her eyes, but May knows immediately that she’s not where she laid her head when she went to sleep. There is a slant of late-afternoon sunlight streaming through a too-big window, and her skin is pressing into softer carpet than would ever grace a plane.

But she turns her head and sees that she is indeed lying on a floor, she sees only brown eyes peering from beneath brown hair, a hand outstretched towards her, and instinct takes over.

*Her.*

She is scrambling away, gasping, moving as fast as her sleep-sodden limbs will let her, panic cuing her words to leap straight to pleading—

“Oh God no please don’t touch me oh my god get back please just put your hand down!” May hears her own voice wringing the stream of words out as she throws herself to the side to jump to her feet….

Get back get back get back get away from her don’t let her touch you—

She isn’t yet upright when she collides with something heavy and wooden, and an unforgiving corner cracks her hard on her forehead. She is knocked back on her heels, dazed, and she feels blood immediately start streaming down her skin. She staggers for a moment, thudding to her knees as she presses her hand to her forehead. But then a blanket is falling gently around her shoulders, and she is finally hearing the other words being said behind her.

“May! It’s okay! Shhh! If you make more noise, Diane will come upstairs and ask what I’m doing and she might see you. You’re okay. Everything’s all right.”

The voice is undoubtedly a child’s but it’s not the voice that haunts her nightmares.

*It’s not her,* May tells herself, pulling in a full breath. *Not that girl. You’re not there.*

*But how does this girl know…*
And before she draws the blanket around herself and turns to look over her shoulder, May realizes who she’s about to see.

The girl is wearing a long-sleeved light blue shirt with a spray of little white flowers embroidered over her heart, green and purple socks, and jeans with hearts sewn on the cuffs. Her heart-shaped face wears a concerned but bewildered expression, her small hands are raised innocently halfway out towards May. She has brown hair that hangs past her shoulders with bangs crowding low over her forehead, but it’s the eyes beneath them that are unmistakable.

May’s breath sticks in her chest. “Skye?” she gasps out.

The girl cocks her head, looking at May quizzically.

“Mary,” she corrects. “You know.” She sounds the tiniest bit hurt.

*Mary Sue Poots.*

*So this is how it happens.*

May takes another deep breath, turning cautiously on the ground to face her, keeping one hand pressed to her forehead and the other gripping the blanket around her body.

“Hi, Mary,” she says cautiously, letting the words get smoothed over with a sigh. “Yeah. Everything’s okay. I’m sorry if I scared you. I was…confused.”

“It’s okay. Are you sure that you’re okay, though?” the little girl asks, stepping closer. She’s taller, as long as May stays on the floor. “Did you hurt your head? I can go get you an ice pack.”

May takes her hand away from her head, and the girl seems a little startled by the amount of blood smeared on her palm. May grimaces. “Yeah… I could really use some clothes first, though…”

Skye gasps a little. “Oh! Yeah, sorry, of course.”

The girl dives under one of the twin-sized beds, extracting a t-shirt and shorts that do seem to be adult-sized. “Here you go,” she says, dropping them onto May’s lap. “I’ll go get you a washcloth and a band-aid while you get dressed.”

The little girl leaves the room without looking back, closing the bedroom door behind her.

The clothes are a faded Belmont University t-shirt that looks like it has been through a few owners already and a pair of gym shorts that look like they were manufactured in the eighties. May finds a box of tissues on the dresser behind her—*Thanks a lot for the head wound*—and wipes the blood off her hand and forehead before dropping the blanket and pulling on the clothes.

She takes in the room around her as she pulls up the shorts. There are twin beds and an open closet full of girls’ clothes, a short bookshelf, and a nightstand for each bed. There are posters of horses and competition ribbons filling the wall above one bed, and only a few cutouts from magazines stuck on the wall over the bed Skye had drawn the clothes out from under. The shoes next to the beds are about the same size, and brightly-colored backpacks sit on both of them. May grabs the nearest one and finds a library book inside. She looks at the most recent date stamped in the back.

*October 3, 1999*

1999.
Okay.

The door opens again.

“Here you go, May,” the young, young voice says, and May turns to see the little girl offering her a damp washcloth and an apple. This version of Skye barely reaches her ribs. “Diane only lets us eat fruit before dinner, but I can probably bring you my dessert later if you’re still here. You might need to hide under my bed though if Kristy comes upstairs.”

Overwhelmed, May opens her hands and accepts the offerings.

“Thank you, Sk-Mary,” she says slowly, sitting back down on the carpet and touching the cloth gently to the skin around her wound. It’s navy blue, so hopefully no one will notice the blood it soaks up. “Is your sister going to be home soon? Are your parents home?”

Skye shakes her head as she sits down across from May, crossing her legs beneath her. “Kristy’s out riding Soda, and Alan is watching her. Diane is making dinner, and Robbie and Mitch are still at baseball practice.”

May nods, making the connections, “Are Diane and Alan your mom and dad?” she asks carefully.

Skye looks away. “Foster mom and dad—for now anyway. I’d really like to be Mary Brody, if they let me stay.” There is something hopeful but afraid in her voice as she says it, as though she’s worried someone might overhear.

Inside May’s chest, something tugs, and in her mind, black and white words float up.

Semi-annual interstate re-placement required…

“Are these your foster mom’s clothes?” she asks, pointing at the shorts and shirt she’s now wearing.

Skye shakes her head, her brows coming together. “You wore these last time, May. I got them from the last donation day at the Harmonds’ church. You told me to keep them with me when I moved.” She’s starting to sound a little bit frustrated, so May lowers the cloth from her face and does her best to smile.

“Mary,” she says slowly, “this is…this is the first time I’ve ever seen you as a kid. This is my first visit to your childhood.”

Skye looks a little confused, but she seems to be trying to work it out. “So… you don’t remember any of the things I remember…because they haven’t happened to you yet?”

May nods, a little impressed. “That’s right.”

Skye nods seriously. “Okay, well…” She sits up straight and sticks out her hand, smiling a little. Her nails are painted hot pink. “I’m Mary. And someday, when I’m big, you and I are going to be friends.” She sounds like she’s reciting words that she’s heard several times.

From you, May realizes. Someday, she’ll hear those words from you.

The hand inside hers suddenly feels so fragile.

Friends. Someday.

Maybe I can handle that.
May feels a real smile pull at her lips as she shakes the girl’s small hand. “Nice to meet you, Mary, I’m May.”

Skye is still smiling as she rolls her eyes. “I know,” she says indulgently. “I remember the other visits.”

The girl turns on the floor and reaches back under her bed. Out of an empty duffle comes a small box that rattles with trinkets, and out of that, a small envelope. “You told me you were coming today, so I tried to stay upstairs until you got here. Kristy usually rides for a few hours every afternoon, and it was safer to stay up here than wait in the living room.”

Out of the envelope comes a folded piece of notebook paper, which Skye offers to May. She sets the rag aside on the floor, already knowing what she will see as she unfolds it.

The paper is still white and stiff in places, un torn and untaped. May looks at a list of dates in her own writing, a list only half as long as the one she received from Coulson back in August. There is no doubt, however, that this is the same paper she’ll hold fifteen years from now.

“I was still at the Tomlinsons’ house when you saw me last,” Skye (Mary?) says, pointing at a date, about seven items down the list. “I didn’t like living with them. They weren’t bad, but they didn’t have a backyard, and their neighborhood scared me. And my teacher at their school was mean.”

Skye is standing so close now that May can see the freckles on her cheeks. Her features are rounded with the softness that fades in teenage years, and her ears aren’t even pierced. May feels like she’s staring at a pencil draft of the young woman she boarded the plane with today.

“How old are you?” she hears herself asking.

Skye meets her eyes. “Nine. I started fourth grade last month.” She grins, big and proud, and May sees preteen teeth still crowded into a child-sized mouth. “Two more years until middle school, now.”

_Pencil draft._

“And…right now, where are we? Where do the Brodys live?” May glances towards the window, but from this angle, she can only see a clouded sky.

Skye seems to understand, and moves over to the windowsill, gesturing May over.

“Come look. Just keep your head low in case Alan or Kristy looks up here.”

May crawls across the carpet until she’s beside Skye, peering over the sill. The land around the house is uneven with low grassy slopes, interspersed with copses of thick pine trees. She can’t even see a main road in this direction, and from the spread of roof beneath the window, May can tell that this house is _big._

*If you had to pick a family…*

“Soda has a paddock out there,” Skye says, pointing down the slopes. “Kristy got him when she turned seven. They’re the same age.”

“What state are we in?” May asks, trying to judge by the flora—it’s perfectly Midwestern.

“Missouri. The Brodys live outside of St. Louis. I’ve only been living here a couple of weeks.”
“Seems like you like it here,” May observes.

Skye turns away from her, looking embarrassed. “I do. But that’s not really what matters.” The little girl goes to her bed and sullenly pulls her backpack to the floor. “I don’t think Kristy likes me much. She’s kind of a bully sometimes, but, you know. She was here first.”

She sounds resigned.

Skye is pulling out a wide-ruled spiral notebook and a single textbook. “I still need to finish my math homework. Mom—Diane—doesn’t let us watch TV until it’s done, and I want to watch M*A*S*H* tonight with Alan and Robbie.”

May smiles to herself as Skye opens her notebook and sprawls on the carpet on her stomach. She doesn’t know how to talk to a nine-year-old, but this seems like a safe place to start. “I liked that show too when I was your age. What are you learning in math this week?”

Skye pushes the open book towards May. “Long division. It’s awful. Can you watch me and make sure that I’m doing it right?” she asks, looking up at May with a far more persuasive edition of her adult puppy-dog eyes.

May can’t think of any reason to say no. “Sure.”

They work quietly through a page of exercises, and May tries to tell herself that this is okay, that it’s apparently normal for this child to sit in her bedroom with a time-traveling adult who’s helping her figure out how many times 8 will go into 656, so May can act like she’s okay with it too. Skye doesn’t seem to notice anything amiss, so May takes that as a good sign and says as little as possible.

The girl isn’t any smarter or slower than May guesses that most kids are when it comes to math, and she patiently scratches the equations onto her notepaper while May looks on, only occasionally telling her to check her work again. After a few minutes, a door slams downstairs, and Skye raises her head, listening carefully. Two pubescent male voices start colliding with a woman’s voice downstairs, and the little girl nods.

“Okay, it’s just Mitch and Robbie,” she says, looking over at May. “They never bother me. They don’t seem too excited about another sister. Oh!” Skye seems to remember something as she stares at May. The child pulls a band-aid from her jeans pocket and offers it to her. Through its wrapper, May can see that it has neon flowers on it. “Sorry. I forgot. Do you need help putting it on?”

May takes it with an indulgent smile, standing up. “No, I got it.”

She uses the mirror on the dresser to apply the glorified sticker to her forehead over the thumbnail-sized gash halfway between her left eyebrow and hairline. The colors are harsh against her skin, and the sight is so comical that she shakes her head at her reflection. The band-aid will be left behind too, she knows, whenever she goes back, but there’s no reason to leave the wound exposed until then.

“May, is this one right?” Skye says from the floor, already back to her homework, and May sits down again on the carpet beside her to take a look.

“Looks right to me,” she says truthfully after checking Skye’s work. Her handwriting is slow and careful, nothing like the scrawl she’ll have as an adult.

“Okay,” the child says patiently, going back to her book for the next problem, like this is the most normal thing in the world.
Is it? How could it be?

“Hey Mary, do we usually do this when we’re together?” May finally asks, wondering how a child this young has hidden a secret like this for this long. “Do we just stay in your room and do homework?”

Skye rolls onto her back and lays her head down on her open textbook, staring up at the ceiling as she answers. “This is the first time I’ve ever had homework to do with you. But yeah, you told me to just make sure that I stayed somewhere where I was alone on the days that you were coming to visit, that you would appear with me wherever that was. You said it’s not about the places so much as the people—that I am the consonant, even if my homes aren’t.”

“Consonant?” May repeats, feeling her eyebrows knit together. “Maybe I said ‘constant’?”

That might make sense…

Skye closes her eyes and wrinkles her nose. “Yeah, maybe. I don’t really remember. I was only seven.”

May feels herself smiling, suddenly nostalgic.

Only seven? You’re only nine now…

The girl is standing, moving to the small bookshelf and extracting a tall, colorful book—a children’s space encyclopedia. She returns to May’s side and flops down beside her, leaning against her arm as she places the book on May’s lap and opens it to the correct page.

“You tried to help me understand your time travel by saying it was kind of like this.” The little girl points at a graphic of the nine planets in their orbits around the sun. “The planets rotate around the sun not because they’re attached by any string or something, but because the sun is made of something different than planets. Suns are strong—I think you said something about gravity, but I don’t really get that part, since gravity makes things go down—so the sun pulls them into orbit and holds on, and the planets turn around it because the sun doesn’t ever let go.”

Skye turns the page, still leaning heavily on May’s shoulder. She points to a new page covered with pictures of comets and a graphic of their elliptical orbits around the sun. “You told me that day that you’re kind of like a comet—they’re accidents, usually, just something broken and cold that got thrown into space, but when they pass something bright and strong, like a star, they keep going—they can’t stop going—but from now on, there’s a center to their travel, something that they always come back to.” Skye is tracing a comet’s oval path with her finger. “You said to imagine that I’m the star, and you’re the comet, and you can’t stop traveling, but you always come back around to me. That made everything make a lot more sense to me back then.”

May can’t speak, so she just looks down at the girl leaning against her, who seems to feel her gaze, and looks up, smiling.

“And then, that day, you picked me up and spun me around and said we could pretend that I was the comet that day. And we spun around the room until you got too dizzy and you put me down because you said you didn’t want to drop me, and then we just danced and twirled and pretended we were both comets running around the room…until things felt quieter and I stopped spinning and realized that your clothes were on the floor and you were gone. And that was sad, but kind of funny.”

May stares at this little girl, already further on the road to familiarity and trust than May thinks she could ever be, and something painful grips at her heart even as she feels her equilibrium fade, her
usual warning bell for what’s about to happen.

“I think I’m actually about to disappear now,” she says quickly as she presses her hands against the floor, not wanting to go without warning (again).

“Oh, okay!” Skye says, and before May realizes what she’s doing, Skye has her arms wrapped around May’s ribs, her cheek pressing against her heart.

“I’ll miss you!” the girl sings against her chest, squeezing her tight. “I hope I’ll still be here when you see me next.”

May lays a cautious, gentle hand on the curve of Skye’s head. “Check the list for the next date,” she says, suddenly feeling something close to envious. “I don’t know which one is next for me, but at least you know what’s next for you.”

“January fourth, next year. I’ll be ten by then!” Skye sits up and smiles at her, scooting back like she’s looking for a good spot to watch a performance. “If I’m still here, I might even get to have a party!”

May makes herself smile back. She can give her this much.

“Then, happy Halloween, happy Thanksgiving, merry Christmas, happy New Year, and happy birthday, kiddo. I hope they’re all great days for you.”

_I hope you get to stay until they’ve passed._

She lifts a tingling hand to wave goodbye, but Skye surprises her by raising her own hand and pressing it into May’s palm. May starts to flinch away but then holds herself still.

Skye’s eyes are bright and fearless as she smiles at her. “Thanks, May. I love you!”

May ceases to breathe as the world turns over and the sunlight disappears.

Chapter End Notes

_I was not ready for the gifs this week of Ming-Na and Chloe twirling around the halls at Wondercon. Basically I screamed silently for ten straight minutes. Best day ever._
Another long one that I couldn't split. God, I miss the days of Bus Family...

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

October 25, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 23

He’s up early, just like before.

She’s curled in the corner of his sofa beneath a blanket, properly dressed in her own clothes at last but still unable to go back to sleep. There isn’t even a suggestion of dawn outside the plane’s windows yet when she hears him moving about on the other side of the wall, so when his door finally slides open, she keeps her movement slow but noticeable, doing her best not to startle him.

“Phil.”

He still jumps a little, his hand flying towards the holster he isn’t wearing to grab a gun that isn’t there. There’s nothing funny about it.

“God, Mel,” he exhales, glaring at her. “Couldn’t have waited downstairs?”

“Sorry,” she mutters as she shrugs off the blanket, lowering her feet to the carpeted floor and turning to face him as he steps closer.

“Am I talking to Present-Day May?” he asks, scrutinizing her appearance in the dim light slanting out of his bunk door. She nods as he flips on the lights in his office area but adjusts them to a low setting. “Okay. Then what happened to your head?”

In the hours since she returned from 1999, she had dug out her personal med kit—always on hand for situations like this—and cleaned the gash in her forehead before closing it with a butterfly bandage. It still aches, and she is sure there will be a halo of bruising around it by evening. She’s almost grateful for it, though—it’s tangible evidence that the visit wasn’t just a dream.

“I knocked it on a dresser in a little girl’s bedroom,” she responds quietly as he sits down on the other side of the sofa, angling his body towards her. She glances towards his desk, where she saw him lock the file up the night before, then watches as the moment of understanding unfolds in his expression.

“You saw Skye?” he asks disbelievingly, looking awed.

“Technically, I saw Mary,” she responds, turning to rest her back against the armrest, pulling her legs back onto the sofa. “She was nine. Brown hair. Brown eyes. So at first I thought she was…”

“Katya,” he finishes for her, his tone falling into somber depths. She nods, looking away.

She’ll never forget the girl’s name, but it has never been easy to say it. She has still never told him about what happened inside that building that day.
“I’m going to tell everyone that you left a cabinet open and I walked into it,” she says with a vague gesture toward her forehead, stretching her legs towards him and prodding him with her toe. “Will you back me up?”

“No problem,” he says patiently. “But I think you’re selling yourself short by letting them think you’re so clumsy.”

“It’s a small price to pay,” she says with a small smile, her heart softening with gratitude.

*None of this would be possible without him.*

But the inevitable question remains, and she knows it before he asks it.

“Are you going to tell her?” His voice is soft, and she can tell he’s trying to hit the right tone that does not make her feel pressured.

She stares down at her knees, though, and lets her answer be the simple truth. “I don’t know.”

“Why wouldn’t you?”

May looks up. “Why would I? She and I aren’t...anything. We’re not even friends. You at least know her, Phil—the two of you actually have some kind of relationship outside of being teammates on missions. I haven’t even managed a conversation that wasn’t mission-related yet, and this girl has years of memories that haven’t happened to me yet...I don’t even know where to begin...”

Her gaze falls away again as she trails off, but after a gentle pause, his answer is simple.

“Begin right here, Mel.”

She meets his eyes again, and he pinches her ankle gently, one side of his mouth lifting in a smile. "Forget what you might become, whatever's ahead, and just keep it simple—what are you right now? You’re the Agent, and she’s the Cadet. You’re the expert, she’s the student. It’s not like you haven’t filled that role before.”

This is true—May had never taken a junior agent to be her own trainee before, but she did teach off and on at the Academy for years. He can tell that she needs more, though, and goes on.

“Melinda, nobody wants things to move forward more than Skye, and I don’t think anyone is more scared than her that she’s going to screw things up and drive you away. So if you’re worried that she’ll try to move things too fast...don’t be. But I’ll tell you exactly what I told her: what happens to the two of you is up to the two of you. No one else can help here.”

May thinks about the file that triggered this travel, and Coulson must see her eyes flicker towards his desk again because he sighs.

“You and I can only guess what those years were like for her—but if you want to know more, then there’s only one way to find out. If you need an order, though, then I’ll give you one: Stop making things worse around here for her. I’m guessing that the five of us are the closest thing she’s had to a family in years, so the least we can do is stop making her feel like she isn’t welcome here.”

He’s gracious enough to say “we” even though she knows he means “you”, but she’s thankful.

“Maybe...” May says slowly, “…maybe Ward could use some extra hands with her training. It’s probably about time that Skye learned some takedowns for the field.”
Phil smiles and pats her foot once, thoughtfully. “I agree. I’ll mention that to him later.”

He stands then, stretching his arms above his head before exhaling and straightening his T-shirt.

“Okay, that’s about as much conversation as I can handle before coffee. Come on down with me and I’ll make you some tea too.”

“Don’t leave the cabinets open,” May reminds him with a smile, standing to follow him out of his office door.

“You know,” Coulson says quietly as they start down the spiral staircase, “it would probably be more convincing if you gave me a mark to match.”

“Don’t tempt me,” May says, tripping him easily as they make their way through the cabin towards the kitchenette.

The sun is just starting to come up.

October 27, 2013: Skye is 23, May is 44

Skye is two-hundred-percent done with these early morning drills. Two years of living in a van and seven years of being out of school have left her with no regimented schedule in her life, let alone a fitness regimen that involved heavy equipment or hand-to-hand combat. It’s been more than two months, and she still hasn’t reached a point where waking up before eight in order to do anything physical feels like a respectable thing. She likes feeling that her body is getting stronger…but God, she misses sleeping in.

As she traipses down the stairs to the cargo level, still crumple-faced under the fluorescent light, it takes her a minute to register the sounds of another voice overlaid with Ward’s. But as she reaches the cargo level, she does indeed see another shape waiting on the mats.

“Ward,” Skye says in an intentionally delirious voice, “is Agent May really standing there, or am I dreaming right now?”

May gives her a look that seems to less exasperated than usual. Ward shakes his head and gestures for Skye to start stretching, which she does, barely taking her eyes off May.

“Coulson said that it’s about time you learned how to take someone down, and obviously it would be better for someone more your size to teach you how.”

“Hold up, am I about to see my S.O. get his ass kicked?” Skye says eagerly, looking up from a hamstring stretch on the floor. “Because this might be the best motivator for morning drill that I’ve ever heard.”

“You’re going to see the Cavalry take me—“ But Ward never gets to say down, because he already is, thudding to the floor bedside Skye, one arm twisted behind his back and May’s bare heel digging into his neck. Skye hadn’t even seen her move.

“You know better than to call me that,” the woman says calmly but with no suggestion of lightness, releasing Ward’s arm only when he groans and taps the mat with his other hand.

“I think you owe her an apology, Ward,” Skye says, unable to keep the grin off her face. “Didn’t anyone ever teach you that no means no?”
Ward rolls his eyes as he gets to his feet, turning to keep May in front of him this time.

“Sorry,” he grumbles, clearly trying not to look embarrassed. “Now why don’t you do that again, slower and hopefully gentler, and let Skye see how you did it.”

The next few mornings start to take on a pattern with May joining them for part of morning drill and doing most of the instruction, with Ward filling in for a life-sized dummy for Skye to practice on. Skye does her best to take everything in quickly, asking as many questions as she can come up with just to keep May talking—it’s music to her ears. May corrects her form and technique with the practiced patience of someone who has taught before—she knows exactly what to look for, exactly how to explain what is wrong, and how to spell out the remedy in methodical, easy-to-follow steps.

It reminds Skye of afternoons spent working on homework together...years and years ago for her, still sometime in the future for May.

No matter how long that still has to wait for what’s coming, this, at least, is something.

“Did it feel this good when you learned how to take down your old S.O.?” Skye asks Ward and May at one point, having just successfully flipped him for the first time. “He probably wasn’t a foot taller than you, but man, this feels so satisfying.”

On the ground, Ward shakes his head before swatting an ankle behind her knee to cause her leg to buckle and send her crumbling to the ground. May looks on from outside the ring, unexpressive as always.

“I didn’t learn this from my S.O.,” she answers casually, “and neither did he.”

“That’s right, you guys were born fighting,” Skye says, digging an elbow into Ward’s ribs before she scrambles to her feet and offers him a hand up. “You both were probably born with blackbelts in your teeth from all the punches and kicks you practiced on your mothers…”

Ward ends the drill that day by letting Skye watch him and May spar for a single round. Skye presses back against he glass doors of the lab and tries not to let her heart rate climb too high as she watches them move around each other, all focused energy and calculating eyes. She knows that watching this shouldn’t make her skin burn beneath her shirt, but somehow it still does.

Ward is tall and long-limbed, but May clearly knows how to accommodate his advantage with her tiny frame. She bends like water around his movements, dodging and sliding but always staying grounded and centered on her feet. The blows that she lands lack the power that he could probably deliver with a single blow, but her hits usually come in combos that are clearly chosen to do maximum damage in a single opportunity. When May finds an opening and goes for the kill, Skye barely realizes what is happening before Ward lands on his back and May rises gracefully to her feet from a crouch, eyes meeting Skye’s for the briefest moment.

Just like before, Skye's mouth pulls into an involuntary smile, even as her cheeks flush.

_This explains so much._

May leaves without a word, not even staying to pull Ward to his feet.

“Don’t you think it’s a bad sign when the team’s Specialist can get his ass handed to him by a tiny little woman?” she asks, throwing her S.O. a gym towel before joining him on the mat with their water bottles.

“I think it should be a comfort that you’ve got two Specialists on your plane,” he responds lightly,
“and that they work well together.”

“Honestly, it’s kind of scary watching you guys fight,” Skye admits. “Makes me wonder how badly either of you could hurt someone if the gloves came off.”

Ward nods. “Good. You’ve got the right idea then—never assume that you’ve seen everything a person can do. You’ve only ever seen May sparring, but you’ll understand once you see her in a real fight.”

“Is it scary?”

Ward doesn’t look at her as he responds. “Every SHIELD Specialist is trained to save lives, but they’re also trained to take them when it's necessary. Don’t ever forget that. We're all still killers when it counts.”

November 2-5, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 23

When their team got the call to head to England after the most recent interplanetary (inter-realm?) invasion, May had been hoping to be something a little better than cleanup crew. Ideally, the mission would have led to sitting across a briefing table (or a dinner table) from an Avenger, something she’d missed her shot at back when she left the field five years ago.

But no such luck— their team has done little more than sift through the rubble for hours, painstakingly storing and cataloging every alien shard that is found. They have plenty of backup, sent from the European bases of SHIELD, but May is secretly crossing her fingers for any crisis in any other part of the world to call their mobile team away at this point. Fitz and Simmons are totally in their element, Skye is as starry-eyed as ever, and even Ward is in a good mood despite being tasked with a chore that he would usually say is absolutely wasting his talents as a Specialist. Coulson, however, is the one who seems completely exasperated by the situation. Despite (or perhaps because of) being the only agent present who has ever interacted with an Asgardian, he appears to be the least amused by the mess the otherworldly visitors left behind.

“It would be nice if, for just once, they sent down the god of Cleaning Up,” May hears him saying as he picks his way through the mess of stone and steel, stooping to grab a piece to add to Skye’s bin as she trails along behind him.

The hacker seems, by far, the most cheerful of the team today.

“I just wish they left their alien ship behind,” the girl says longingly, hardly paying attention to where she is walking, a starry look in her eyes.

“So we could clean that up too?” May hears herself saying as she scans yet another pile of rubble with their instruments. Skye catches her eye and grins wide. The banter is coming easier now that they’ve started spending more time together.

“So we could go inside! Take a peek under the hood, maybe take it for a spin?”

May raises an eyebrow at her.

*We?*

But Skye is still grinning, undeterred. “Come on,” she says goadingly, “you’re telling me that piloting an alien ship *isn’t* on your bucket list?”
May lets herself smile a little as she shakes her head and turns back to the mess in front of her, basking in the glow of that childlike wonder that is such a distant memory for field agents as old as herself. Looking at her, May can see the pencil draft of the girl fourteen years ago now fleshed out before her, still optimistic, still bright. She listens to the girl chatter away, ambient noise that May will never call music but noise that is nevertheless starting to sound familiar, even comforting.

Something squeezes gently at her heart, and she doesn't try to shake the feeling off.

Maybe that’s why she slips up and corrects Coulson about the appropriate adjective to apply to Thor, much to everyone’s immediately-apparent glee. May glides through them with the same graceful mask that she presents to the world every single day, trying to assure herself that though many would think it overshare, there is nothing embarrassing about what she just said.

She has a weakness for Asgardians. So sue her.

After two days of rubble-grousing and bland British food, their team gets a transmission from HQ that there has been something odd in Norway, and May doesn’t bother trying to mask her eagerness to move on to something other than pebble patrol. Their team stands around the holocom and learns about a couple that cut down a tree and then beat up a pair of park rangers…which doesn’t seem too noteworthy until they hear about the manner in which the men were attacked: by a tiny, little woman with only a broken stick.

Coulson decides to take Ward and Simmons to investigate on the ground. “Fitz, I’ll leave you here so that you can start work immediately on any data that Simmons sends you. May, Skye, go ahead and scan all channels for anything on the culprits. Learn anything we can about the cult they supposedly belong to, and get ears out for any other activity that might be linked to them.”

After the SUV is out of sight in the direction of the national park, she and Skye leave Fitz in the lab and return to the holocom. Even though this is technically Skye’s field of expertise, May takes charge and instructs her to program a Net scanner filtering for any stories or lines that might be related to the couple. May starts gathering news feeds and running them simultaneously on SHIELD’s facial recognition software, using the two DMV shots and photos from their public profiles for comparison.

Too soon, they have both run out of things to keep themselves busy, and the inevitable silent stalemate of the waiting game begins. May leans on her elbows and watches their programs run on the tablescreen even as she feels the girl’s eyes flicker cautiously towards her.

Twenty dollars says she speaks in the next thirty seconds.

Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven…

“So…Thor’s dreamy, huh?” Skye asks, almost exactly the question that May expected.

Four seconds.

“Don’t tell me you disagree,” she responds, looking up.

Skye scoffs a little, looking back down at the tablescreen and pulling up a separate window to search photos of the Avengers. “Well, if I had to pick an Avenger, I’d have to go with Stark, if only because he can also read code and because I heard he gave Coulson the runaround back in the day. Or maybe the Black Widow. Those legs could kill a man—and probably have. What is that woman’s real name, anyway? I can’t believe I never thought to look that up.”

May smiles to herself and keeps her eyes down. “Her name is Natasha Romanoff,” she
answers, mentally flipping a coin to make her choice.

*Keep it to yourself and let things stay what they are.*

*Or tell her...and maybe you can edge one step closer to...whatever you might be someday.*

*Choose.*

“Well, that’s got That's-Not-How-You-Spell-My-Name written all over it,” Skye is muttering to herself. "If that were my name, I’d take a nickname too.”

*As segues go...*

May looks up and faces the girl dead-on. “You already did, though, didn't you? Your name wasn’t always Skye.”

She says it quietly, and the girl looks up, her gaze wavering between confused and suspicious. May reaches up and tucks her hair behind her ear, watching the girl’s eyes dart to the wound, still bright on her forehead. May nearly smiles as she sees the moment of realization change Skye’s features in a split second—her mouth falls open a little, her eyes barely widen, an expression verging on wonder.

Not unlike the look May saw the day that they first met back in August.

“The Brody's...” Skye exhales, the faintest, disbelieving smile hinted at on her lips, “You...you hit your head on the dresser that day...”

May nods, touching the wound gently with her thumbnail. “Still hurts like a bitch, too. Is it going to scar?”

Skye shrugs, seeming a little amazed that May is still speaking. “How would I know that?”

May would raise an eyebrow if it didn't still hurt to do so. “Because at this point, you’ve seen more of future me than I have. So is it going to scar?”

Skye cracks a real grin then. “No, I don’t think so. That’s not one of the scars I asked you about growing up.”

May thinks about that. “Maybe you never asked because you already knew how it got there.”

Skye shrugs. “Maybe. But I don’t remember you having a mark there. So I think you’re good.”

May lets her lips turn into a small smile and looks back down at the table, watching the fruitless search progress through the various news channels of the region.

"Is that the only visit so far?" Skye asks cautiously, and May nods as she looks up.

"So far. Do you know which one will be next for me?"

Skye looks away. "I think I can guess, but I'm not sure. If it's the one when I was eleven, then that would make sense."

"Why?"

Skye's brow furrows, and it looks like she's trying to say something but can't. May has a feeling she knows.
"If you're trying to warn me about something that's going to happen in the visit, but can't, it's because that's the way it's going to happen, and you can't change the way it happens. The event is contingent upon what I know and don't know, so that can't change before the memory exists for both of us."

Skye is nodding. "Yeah, you told me something like that before." Her gaze has gone somewhere far away. “Why now?"

May's brow wrinkles. "Why now what?"

Skye still doesn't meet her eyes. “Why do you think you went to my childhood…now?"" 

May stares across the table at the girl and clamps her mouth around the obvious answer. 

*Because I’d read your file that night. Because I learned more than I wanted to know. Because this time-travel mess doesn’t always make sense, but there are moments when it does, and that was one of them.*

But May just shakes her head and wraps her lie in a possible truth. “I'm not sure. Maybe you called, and the universe answered.”

Skye looks down at the table, spinning the silver restrictor cuff on her wrist. “I don’t think that’s how it works, or I would have seen you a lot more often.”

The admission, so simple in nature, catches May off-guard. “You got twenty-eight visits,” she reminds the girl. “Over almost twenty years.”

“And a lot of life happened in between those visits,” Skye responds, still avoiding her eyes, still spinning the cuff.

May stares down at the table and thinks through the tragic childhood that she can infer from the file she read.

“Did you get to stay with the Brody's?” she asks quietly, already knowing the answer.

Skye’s voice is heavy with forced lightness. “No. They sent me back just a few weeks later.”

“I’m sorry,” May offers, remembering the way the nine-year-old had seemed embarrassed by her own hope.

The girl in front of her sighs and shrugs. “So was I.”

The program running in front of them suddenly reacts, grabbing an image and asking May for confirmation.

“We got a hit on our couple,” she announces, sending the feed to the main screen as Skye hurries around to stand at her elbow. “Get Coulson on the line.”

**Skye:**

The staff is clearly Asgardian, but the god of thunder isn’t answering his phone. Fortunately, he’s not the only person they can ask for help.

In Seville, a Norse mythology professor explains the concept of a Berserker staff and the importance of finding the pieces (which were hidden for this exact reason—people suck). The urgency of the mission keeps Skye from mentioning May’s visit to her past again, but there seems to be a different
feeling in the room as they work together to find Viking connections in Seville. May hadn’t seemed too amused by Skye’s suggestion in front of the others that the staff “called to” the couple with magic, but it was worth it to Skye to feel like they were finally in on the same joke.

Soon enough, she’s following Ward through a crypt beneath a church, dodging cobwebs and stacks of skulls in search of a piece of a weapon that was legendary until this week. At one point, Ward takes off ahead of her, chasing a figure that wasn’t just a skeleton, and by the time Skye catches up with him, something has clearly gone horribly wrong.

“Ward?” she says, falling to her knees at his side where he’s fallen. As soon as she touches him, he gasps and starts flailing at her, swinging a powerful punch at her head, which she barely dodges. He’s clearly terrified and not himself.

It’s not the first time Skye’s seen a SHIELD agent react this way to a bad surprise…

Skye touches the comm in her ear. “Guys, something’s wrong with Ward.”

He won’t let Simmons sedate him, even though he’s a barely-contained warhead by the time they get him back on the plane and get his vitals checked.

“Whatever you need, I am here for you,” she mutters, low enough for Fitzsimmons not to hear.

“That’s right,” he sneers, very close to her face. “To talk. That’s all you ever do is talk. Don’t you ever get tired of hearing your own voice?”

His voice is the most terrifying she’s ever heard it, all compressed anger and tempered steel. She tries to let his venomous words slide right off her, but she doubts they can blame all of this on the staff.

Coulson and Ward manage to out the professor as an Asgardian, and the rest of them crowd around the holocom to watch the real story unfold. The only threat that Coulson can make is to the man’s anonymity, and eventually the man points their plane towards Dublin.

Skye watches Ward slam everything he touches—every box, every door—and rounds on Coulson, who says he’s okay to go out with the team. When Skye turns to May for backup, the woman only shrugs. “I’m with Coulson.”

Skye takes a deep breath and tries to trust the two most experienced voices, who have probably gone on missions in worse states, and follows her team to the church.

The “angry youths” beat them to the monastery and make quite a statement by putting the staff through the Asgardian’s heart. Skye can’t believe her eyes as Ward pulls the staff fragment out of the skewered professor and tackles the Norseman over the balcony with a literal roar. She chases him down the stairs, tries to talk him down (after all, that’s all she does…), but then a pack of snarling men burst into the room and a strong arm bars across her chest, pulling her back against the wall.

“Don’t look,” May orders in a low voice at her shoulder, and Skye’s eyes dart to hers. The woman’s face is set. “If you see him do this, you will never forget it. So if you don’t want to remember this, then don’t look.”

May turns around, one arm remaining firm and protective in front of Skye, who tucks her face down behind May’s shoulder. The fight gets loud, and Skye closes her eyes.

She won’t watch, but she still hears.

“Count to two hundred,” the woman whispers over her shoulder, her words cutting through the
noise.

Skye reaches one-thirty-nine before she hears the staff pieces clatter to the ground. She lifts her head and sees that Ward is on his knees, but he is the only one even close to standing.

May lowers her arm, and Skye rushes to his side. He’s drenched with sweat and bleeding from a few different places, but nothing looks life-threatening as Skye hangs his arm over her shoulder to pull him to his feet.

The door breaks open ahead of a few more youths, and Ward starts to pull away, ready to fight again, but May’s arm stops him.

“This time, let me help.”

Her eyes briefly meet Skye’s before she faces their opponents.

Don’t look.

This time, Skye doesn’t listen.

May is nothing like Ward as she picks up two fragments that Ward had dropped, which merge with the remaining piece to form a completed Berserker staff in her hands. She doesn’t snarl or roar, but everything she does is focused and precise and not at all restrained—she is deadly. Her strength is clearly compounded, a single hit sending an opponent flying across the room, and the whole thing is somehow both terrifying and stunning.

When SHIELD agents are once again the only people left standing, May lowers herself to one knee, and the staff clatters to the floor too. The woman’s hands are shaking as she looks up at Ward and Skye huddled against the wall. She looks pained as her eyes meet Skye’s.

You saw.

Skye can’t make her tongue work, but she manages to return May’s nod.

Because yes, now, she sees.

This is the life that May was hiding for all those years before. The woman who read her books and helped her with homework and taught her how to dance and prank and to never give up…this is the rest of her. She fights and beats and is beaten and sometimes kills--this...this is what she does. This is May, too.

Coulson gives their team a night in a four-star hotel in Dublin while he takes the professor back to Seville and then sees the staff all the way to the Fridge. May doesn’t say a word as she drives the rest of the team in the SUV to their hotel, but that’s nothing new. The speed at which she disappears from the lobby, however, is exceptional.

Skye finds Ward at the bar later, and he tries to apologize for his words from earlier. She waves them off.

“Does everything just slide right off you?” he asks, staring at her in the half-darkness.

She spins the cuff concealing the skin of her right wrist and thinks of all the things that didn’t. All the things that don’t.

“No. If it helped, I’d rage all the time. But it doesn’t.”
He doesn’t want to talk tonight, and she gets that. But she lingers in the bar, watching for any sign of another shadow, another haunted ghost. May never surfaces, and Skye eventually goes back to her room without even ordering a drink.

Of all the nights since she finally met May two months ago, this one feels the loneliest. She misses the woman today the way that she always does, but now, knowing what May went through last night and knowing that she won’t turn to anyone else for help…this is a different kind of ache. The kind it somehow feels like Skye has no right to feel.

Jemma doesn’t ask questions when Skye knocks on her door, just steps back and invites her in to the mess. She and Fitz are sprawled on the floor between the beds compiling data from the last few days, everything from the ship to the staff to the Asgardian’s stab-wound recovery time.

Skye curls up on Jemma’s bed and listens to them talk, falling asleep to the ambient noise that’s started to sound something like home.

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May:

Her hands are not shaking anymore, and heart has already returned to its usual resting rate. Visions of a dark-eyed girl with an outstretched hand still flash before her eyes, along with visions of her own hand raising a gun, lightning-fast, and leveling at her head…but that’s nothing new. She’s seen those images often enough to ignore them when she has to.

She hadn’t wanted to pick the staff up, not knowing how her body would respond—whether her so-called ‘emergency exit’ would open up and carry her away from her team right when she was supposed to be protecting them. But at the last moment, she had remembered the words of a future visitor.

*I’m here from November, and we’ve done all right so far.*

So she picked it up.

She did her job.

And then she put it down.

Touching the staff was like a lightning strike—filling her with heat and light and noise. In a single instant, everything was sharper, clearer, simpler. She thought *Fight* and she fought. She thought *Stop*, and she stopped.

So she isn’t really sure what to say to Ward as he stares at her from the other side of her hotel room's coffee table, his hands clearly being forced not to shake.

“Sorry for being a dick today,” he says tiredly, resting his elbows on his knees, curling into himself like a beaten boxer on a stool.

“Do you really think you only get to blame that staff for the way you’ve been acting?” May responds, watching him carefully. The alcohol in her system is gradually softening the edges of everything, but not by much. She’s ready to fight again if she has to.

Ward’s eyes meet hers, cold and guarded. “Say it again?” he dares her.

“The staff might have been magic, but all it did was strengthen what was already there. The rage you feel today—it’s been there all along, Ward. Mine has too. I just haven’t been pretending otherwise.”
She’s baiting him, and she can tell he knows it. They’re about to see if he’s got himself under control enough to not lunge across the table at her.

He holds her gaze, and she sees him actively press down on everything that’s rising up.

*Good.*

“You’ve probably seen worse things than me,” he finally says, downing the last of his drink and reaching for the bottle she’d brought to her room. “So how are you not pulling apart at the seams right now?”

His dark eyes, darker than they used to be, are scrutinizing her carefully, but she doesn’t need to lie. Not about this.

“When you know your traumas well, there’s no way for them to surprise you. What I saw—I’ve seen it every day for years. The only thing that was new was the power.” She sets her empty tumbler on the table between them. She may have had more to drink than she realized because the glass comes down on the granite a bit louder than she meant for it to.

Maybe she can blame it on the staff.

“But why would you want to see it every day?” he asks, picking up his refilled cup but not sipping it. “I saw the worst moment of my life on repeat today, in hi-def Technicolor. It’s still playing now. That memory…there’s a reason I buried it. It makes me the worst version of myself.”

She’s read his unredacted file too. He doesn’t need to tell her specifics.

“I can teach you, if you want,” she offers, logic laced with compassion. “I can show you how I deal with things if you want to learn.”

He, more than anyone, could benefit from what she could teach him about self-control. He actually smirks at the offer, though.

“Thanks, but I think one frozen heart per team is enough.”

His eyes glint, steel raised in a parry, and she realizes that he’s baiting her too.

“Good.”

“I’m far from cold inside,” she says truthfully, unzipping her jacket and shrugging it off. “There’s other ways than hitting things to work out stress.”

She meets his eyes across the table. He puts his glass down.

They both know they’re done talking.

The room she appears in is slanted with late-afternoon sun, shadows of geometric shapes stretching across the floor. The ground beneath her is dusty, and the air smells of varnish and gunpowder. She knows where she is before she hears a sound.

*Of course it would be this place tonight.*

There is no way she’s getting out of the building unnoticed, so she keeps her breathing silent and pulls herself into the darkest corner she can see, tucked behind an armoire and a dresser against a concrete wall. If it were anywhere else, she might just put her head down and try to sleep while
waiting for time to tug her back to her present. But she’ll never be able to sleep when reality and her nightmares sound the same.

She can’t watch, but she has to hear.

“I like the pain.”

She knows the script by heart.

She hears the movement of the actors shifting slowly across the room, closer to her. She hears the bodies crashing to the floor. She hears the entrances of the SHIELD team and the extra visitor. She hears the scrape of metal against stone as a gun rotates on the ground.

“Everything’s gonna be all right.”

One shot.

Another body falls.

*One…two…*

She hears the sounds of her team being pushed into the other room and a door slammed. She hears bare feet scuff on concrete and clothes rustling. She hears a bullet clatter to the floor.

*Eleven…twelve…thirteen…*

She hears a gasp and a scuffle just before she feels herself fall forward in time again.

She comes back to the present still hours away from a sunrise, sprawled on the floor beside her bed. Faint breathing tells her that other half of it is still occupied, a fact that only distantly registers as surprising. She crawls back into it without bothering with clothes—for once, it’s exactly how she was when she left.

She’s ninety-five percent sure that Ward didn’t even notice that she was gone.
November 25, 2001: May is 44, Skye is 12

“May?”

Oh for God’s sake…not again…

The room around them is a different bedroom than the one May had met nine-year-old Skye in during her last visit. There are two sets of bunk beds pressed against the walls, and the carpet around them is barely visible for all the clutter of clothes, backpacks, toys, and shoes. May’s eyes go straight to the girl stretched out on the bed closest to her, her face appearing from behind a brightly-colored magazine.

“Hey Sk—Mary,” May manages to catch herself, still trying to catch her breath. “Are we alone?”

“Looks that way, doesn’t it?” Skye responds, sitting up and tossing the magazine aside. She has a preteen’s tone to match her preteen clothes—a fitted t-shirt and sparkly jeans. She’s definitely older, but not by too much—her features are just barely emerging from the childish softness that May saw last time, but her teeth still look too big for her mouth, and there’s no makeup on her face. Her bangs have grown out, but her hair is overall shorter, just barely reaching her shoulders.

May sits up amidst the mess on the floor, folding her legs against her body and wrapping her arms around her calves. “Do you have something I could put on?” she asks, debating pulling on the nearest t-shirt on the floor if the answer is ‘no’.

But Skye already has the clothes out, and May catches the same shirt and shorts that she wore during her last visit. She starts to pull the shirt on, but then nearly gives up with her arms halfway through the sleeves. Her body isn’t settling—the pins-and-needles feeling that usually accompanies travel isn’t dissipating—meaning this visit is going to be brief.

“I’m sorry, kid, I won’t be here for very long…” May says, managing to get the shirt over her head but settling for just holding the shorts over her lap—she doesn’t think she’d stay upright if she tried to stand.

“Wait, that’s it? You’re just showing up and then running away again?” Skye is getting up from the bed now, ankle deep in clutter as she moves towards May. Her tone is hurt, but May can’t quite react to that right now.

“I’m not running away, Mary—I don’t have any control over this,” May responds a little shortly, looking up and trying to focus on the girl’s face.

Skye looks frustrated, folding her arms across her own chest.

“Well, when am I gonna see you again?” she asks quickly, the pain clearly exposed in her voice now.

“I don’t know, Mary—can you check your list?” May gasps out, tipping forward and catching herself with one hand against the carpet.
Let me finish the conversation, she pleads with whatever force of nature causes all this to happen. At least finish the conversation before I go…

“But…last time, you said you would tell me from visit to visit when to expect you again. We ran out of dates on the List last year.”

Oh great. Why in the world would I tell her something like that?

May has no idea what the date is, or which date is next. She straightens and looks up at Skye, who is at least six inches taller than her nine-year-old self.

“I’m sorry, Mary—I haven’t memorized the List yet. I’ll try to do that before next time. I had no idea that I would travel to you again so soon…The first time was only two weeks ago for me…”

The girl’s brow scrunches up, a glare competing with a pout. “Two weeks ago for me was my birthday.”

“Your birthday?” May repeats, surprised, “How old are you now? What day is your birthday?”

“I’m twelve, and it’s November eleventh—thanks for remembering. And guess what I got for my birthday? A ride to a new state, another new house, and another new family that is totally not psyched to get another older kid.”

May sighs, her vision swimming. “Mary, I’m so sorry, I wish I could stay longer but—“

Darkness presses in, and the world flips.

November 9, 2013

She’s thudding back onto the floor beside the bed that she’d disappeared from.

“May?” a surprised whisper slips through the darkness as she sits up slowly in the dark room, hearing the person on the bed roll over.

Hopefully he only heard you return, not disappear.

She knows she shouldn’t have stayed in his bed last night, risking precisely this situation…but it’s too late to change that now.

“Did you just seriously just fall out of bed?” Ward asks as his head pokes over the edge of the mattress.

May keeps her eyes closed and chooses the simplest lie—it will cost some pride, but that’s a small price to pay.

“Maybe I’m used to sleeping in the middle,” she responds slowly, opening her eyes and looking at him pointedly. She rests her head against the mattress so that she won’t sway as she forces her eyes to focus.

“You’re the one in my room,” he reminds her. “There’s a perfectly good bed down the hall if you’d wanted one all to yourself.”

“Where’s the fun in that?” she attempts, finally trusting herself to try to get to her feet. She slips back beneath the covers, and his hand slides easily around her hip, pulling her closer.

Don’t let it seem personal, she reminds herself, stopping herself from settling against his body. All or
nothing—don’t let him get the wrong idea. And for now…you might as well clear your head.

She swings her leg across his beneath the covers and sits up astride his hips. He seems a little surprised, but he’s already half-ready for her and barely protests at all.

“Sure you don’t want to just go back to sleep?” he asks slowly, his hands spreading over her thighs and dragging gently down them.

“I think I’m going to need to do something else first,” she responds, smoothing her hands up his chest, rocking her body against him just enough to work him up further.

All because two minutes ago you were a decade into the past in a twelve-year-old’s bedroom, she thinks incredulously, bending to press her lips against his skin.

Sure, she rationalizes as a large hand smooths down her back, the other burying in her hair, but there are worse reasons for a girl to find herself here.

November 10, 2013: Skye is 23, May is 44

They’re back on the plane in Dublin, about to head to Batesville, Utah, and Coulson is telling her that their next contact will be a woman suspected to have telekinetic powers. Like many things in S HIELD, this process of checking out a gifted individual has an unnecessarily long title—“Index Asset Evaluation and Intake”, he calls it.

“Well, that needs a better name,” Skye mutters towards her tablet, still monitored through her silver wristband. “Less IRS, more…better. Something like ‘The Welcome Wagon’.”

Lame, she chides herself. Lame, even for you.

“I want you to pay close attention on this one, Skye,” Coulson says, getting up from his desk and starting towards the door. “It’s an opportunity to learn how to deal with someone with newfound abilities.”

“It’s not like I’ve never done this before,” she reminds him, standing to follow. “I found Mike Petersen before you did…” And May, if that counts…

“Remember how that went?” Coulson reminds her with a raised eyebrow. “This is a chance to see how it’s done when it’s done right.”

“How many people like this have you encountered?” she asks, following him out of his office and down the spiral staircase and not thinking about the one on the plane that’s just a given for both of them.

“A handful,” he answers from five steps below her. “There’s not that many people on the Index.”

“They must wig out when they see the S HIELD trucks roll up,” Skye thinks aloud, remembering her surprise that day two months ago when someone slid her van door open and she’d seen two Men in Black standing on the other side.

“Each case is different.”

Skye is still staring at the information on her tablet as they make their way through the cabin—the dead technicians, the particle accelerator, the name of the inspector in question.
“…friends, co-workers dead, and on top of that, this girl might have some crazy power that she can’t understand?”

“Or control,” Coulson adds, catching her eye as they stop just before the doorway to the cargo area, and Skye has a feeling that they’re thinking about the same teammate.

“So,” she says quietly, “why isn’t May on—”

“Because there’s nothing to talk about,” Coulson cuts her off. “She was never a danger to others, at least not directly, so we all agreed that there was no need to say anything to SHIELD. She took herself off the field, and we agreed that that was enough.”

“‘We all’?” Skye repeats, wondering who else knows.

Coulson seems to debate answering, but he finally responds, “May, her husband, and myself.”

"Right. Of course."

May had told her years ago that there had been a time in her life that she’d been married, a revelation that was less confusing to Skye back then. Now, she’s a little surprised by the sickened clench that she feels in her chest at the thought of May being in another relationship, however distant it was. It’s certainly harder to stomach, now that she knows how their story go will go.

“When was that? 2008?” Skye asks, recalling the Admin transfer date in May’s file, and Coulson nods. Skye forces herself to keep talking, trying to push away the pained feeling in her chest. “What exactly happened? Some accident like this?” She vaguely lifts her tablet with the headline still spread across it.

But Coulson shakes his head. “That’s the kind of story you’re going to have to get from her. Remember what I said.”

“It’s the most fair to both of you."

Skye gets Coulson bringing along May to talk to the possibly-powered girl, but why he thinks taking his Robocop to the front door with him is a good idea is beyond Skye. May assumes a spot halfway between the SUV and the young woman’s house, and Skye rolls down the window to listen. The nearest neighbors are muttering plenty of colorful words to one another, but it’s only when one of them hurls an egg at the woman’s house that they start to get bold.

When a police car roars to life without anyone behind the wheel, May leaps into action, clearing a path, and Coulson tackles a policeman out of the way. Skye jumps out of the car to calm a screeching woman, looking up in time to see the officer on the porch pull a gun on the terrified blonde.

“It wasn’t me!” the blonde woman is sobbing. “Please! It wasn’t me!”

Coulson’s voice is the gentlest Skye’s heard it, but she can hear the nerves working right under the surface. “Please calm down. We’re not going to let anyone hurt you.”

“He’s done this before.”

But then there’s the charge-and-pop sound of the Night-Night gun being fired, and the woman falls facedown on her lawn.

Skye’s eyes go wide as they all turn towards May, who lowers her pistol calmly, looking utterly
May:

May is thankful for Ward’s presence in the SUV on the ride back to the plane—she can tell that it’s all that’s keeping Skye from ripping into them both about the situation at the poor girl’s house. Coulson is quiet beside her while Ward and Skye brace the unconscious woman on the backseat between them, her head lolling on Skye’s shoulder.

May can feel Skye’s daggers from behind her, but they’re not important. She knows Coulson understands, and that’s all that matters. She gets enough re-runs of Bahrain without seeing the scenario play out again in a Utah suburb.

Coulson orders her to get the plane in the air bound for the Fridge and Ward to carry the girl straight to the Cage. Fitzsimmons had already removed the furniture, so by the time they’ve hit 36,000 feet and May makes her way to the holocom, the unconscious girl and a mattress are the only things in the Cage.

“How is she?” May asks, staring at the camera feed on the big screen.

“The dendrotoxin’s wearing off. She’ll be awake soon, in a strange room, scared. Our next interaction is crucial to gaining her trust,” he says, turning to her. “Which is why I want you there.”

She understands why—doesn’t mean she agrees.

The girl looks terrified as she sits up on the mattress when May and Coulson walk in. It’s too familiar in too many ways, so May stops only two steps inside the closed door while Coulson offers the girl a bottle of water.

“How did I get here?” the girl asks in a shaky voice, folding herself against the vibranium wall.

“I sedated you,” May answers without apology, and she sees Coulson cringe in her periphery.

“I apologize for bringing you in that way,” he adds, turning back to the girl. “Things were escalating. It was for everyone’s safety.”

“Everyone’s safety. Good. Okay,” she girl says slowly, and May is surprised by how sincere she sounds.

The girl doesn’t seem to hold anything against her neighbors, and she insists that she wasn’t angry at them when the car came to life.

“My team is working to determine what really did happen,” Coulson says as he explains the accident at the particle accelerator, “and what might have happened to you. We believe that as a result of the accident, you somehow acquired some form of telekinetic ability.”

The idea seems very startling to the girl, and May can tell that they’ve got this all wrong somewhere.

“You think I did that?” the girl stammers.

“We’re not sure… but all these events have one thing in common,” Coulson explains gently.

May watches the moment of understanding play out on the girl’s face. “Me,” she says slowly. “But
I’m not causing it. If it were me, then I could make it stop…”

Compassion swells up in May’s heart. “But if it’s not you, then what is it?”

Hannah’s eyes dart between the two of them. “You people won’t believe me,” she chokes out, clearly coming apart inside.

*Take a knee*, May feels a gentle memory prompt her, and she lowers herself to the floor in front of the girl.

“Try me,” she urges, softening her expression as much as she can. *You’d be surprised the things I can believe.*

The girl sniffs and lowers her eyes. “I’m being haunted—by demons.”

When they step back out in the hallway a few minutes later, Coulson stops May before they make their way down to the rest of the team.

“What do you think?” he asks, glancing at the door they’ve just locked.

“I think she’s telling the truth—she’s not trying to do any of this—and I don’t think she belongs in the Fridge,” May says firmly, meeting his eyes.

He nods. “I agree. But something is definitely happening, and we can’t let her off this plane until we figure out what.” There’s a beat of silence before he adds, “Is there anything helpful that you could tell her?”

May shoots him a glare. “If I knew how to stop something like this, I would have stopped it a long time ago.”

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**Skye:**

Skye doesn’t buy Jemma and Fitz’s Cavalry story for one second, but the fact that it was set in a place as obscure as Bahrain suggests that that detail, at least, is true. It still sounded far too much like a cartoon, but there had to be a real story in there somewhere, one that it was looking like Skye would never get directly from May if this day was any indication.

The woman is standing next to Coulson’s desk like a sentry, her deadly hands clasped coolly at her waist, when Skye comes in to ask for a chance to talk to Hannah herself.

“She’s not dangerous! She’s nice!” Skye insists, flipping through the evidence on her tablet to show them. “And somebody with that much empathy being responsible for that much loss of life? She’s devastated. Spouting nonsense about God punishing her--”

“People believe what they need to believe to justify their actions,” May cuts in, not harshly, but Skye is ready to snap.

“Is that how you justify your ‘shoot first’ policy?” she cuts back sharply. “At least let me try to repair that damage.”

May’s gaze sharpens just a little, and Skye gets the impression that she is forcing herself to speak with measured patience. “Until we figure out what’s going on with her, she stays locked up, and you stay away.”
Skye throws up her hands, one still gripping the tablet. “What the hell, May? Why are you being like this? Aren’t you supposed to be the one person on this plane who could truly sympathize with her?”

May’s eyes flash, but it’s Coulson who speaks first.

“Enough!” he cuts them both off, the subtle change in his tone enough to warn Skye that she has crossed a line. She bites her lip, and a shadowbox tips off the shelf.

Coulson picks the pieces up while Skye continues to glare at May. “You’re asking the right questions, Skye,” he says, sitting back down. “But for now, that’s all you get to do.” He and May share a look, and Skye feels frustrated all over again that she is still looking in from the outside at the woman she (thought that she) had known her whole life. She turns away first and leaves in a huff, before she can say one more thing to set this whole situation back another few years.

“I just don’t understand her at all,” she rants to Ward later while he makes a sandwich in the kitchenette. Even without telling him about her lifelong relationship to May, she’s hoping he’ll be sympathetic. He doesn’t need to know how much May has in common with the girl in their Cage to agree that the woman is being colossally unfair to her.

Surprisingly, he takes May’s side. “You might want to be less confrontational with Agent May,” he warns her, grinding pepper over the sandwich on his plate.

“I’m not scared of her,” Skye says truthfully, but then gets an idea. “Well, I am…but just because the Cavalry shot a hundred guys on horseback doesn’t mean she knows how people work.”

He takes the bait perfectly. “Horseback? Where’d you hear that?”

“FitzSimmons,” she responds innocently.

“Were they messing with you?”

She shrugs, wondering what differences she’s about to hear.

“Story gets bigger every year,” he says, and lays out another story of the Cavalry: Not a hundred guys—twenty trained assassins. It wasn’t an assault—it was a rescue. No support, and certainly no horse. One pistol was all Agent Melinda May needed to get the job done.

“Well if it went so well, then why is she so squirrely about the nickname?” Skye asks, attempting to reconcile this story with the mental image of the woman she’s been repeatedly revising. Killed twenty men on her own…I might not have believed it before, but after seeing her with the Berserker staff, I guess I can believe it now.

“May’s not in it for the glory,” Ward says, turning back to his sandwich. “She got the job done. End of story.”

They haven’t even made it through half of the food on their plates when the lights in the plane suddenly go off and the aircraft dips dangerously towards the earth. Skye runs after Ward to the cockpit where they see May scrambling into the pilot’s seat. Her S.O. throws himself into the seat beside her while Skye presses back against the door, wishing that her first time in a cockpit were coming under better circumstances.

May’s voice is urgent but controlled as she delivers commands to Ward and her hands fly over the switches and levers, attempting to slow their aircraft’s descent.

“What can I do?” Skye asks breathlessly, watching the ground approach remarkably fast.
“Buckle up,” May orders, and Skye throws herself into the jump seat.

The woman’s hands are strong as they pull the controls and guide the plane carefully towards an approaching stretch of cornfield. The landing is rough, and they more or less skid to a halt, but Skye is barely surprised to see that May looks as composed as ever when the plane finally stills, barely breathing harder despite just saving them all from a deadly crash.

The five of them converge in the cabin, and they learn that there’s an extra (Non-corporeal? Seriously what the hell?) passenger on the plane, probably after the girl in their cage. Coulson sends Ward and Simmons to find Fitz, May to reboot the systems, and Skye to talk to Hannah.

The girl is surprisingly coherent for all that she’s been through in the past few hours.

“We need you to stay in the cage so that you’re safe,” Skye tells her gently through the thick door, tucking herself against it on the floor. “Something bad is out here.”

“Demons,” the girl says assuredly from the other side. “Do you believe in God?”

Skye thinks of the twisted road that has brought her to where she is today, and her answer comes easily. “Honestly? Not really.”

“Well I do. And I know that he’s punishing me and I deserve it.”

But Skye can’t just let this slide by. She’s had this conversation before for the same reason. “No. No, you don’t. No one does.”

She thinks of the only truthful comfort she can offer, so she tips her head towards the door and offers a story. “I had a few nuns around me growing up and they would talk like that—scaring kids with stories about God’s wrath. Made me not want to believe. The only words that stuck with me were something Sister Mckenna said…their’s simple and a little sappy, but that’s the version I like: God is love. The thing that holds us together. And if that’s true, I don’t think he would punish you for a mistake. I think he’d forgive a mistake.”

“I want to believe that. I do,” Hannah is saying through the door when suddenly May all but materializes out of the darkness, and Skye wonders how long she’d been standing there.

“I’ll stand guard now,” the woman says in a tone that leaves no room for discussion, but Skye tries anyway.

“I’d rather stay here—“

“It needs to get done, not discussed,” May cuts her off. “That’s an order.”

It’s the first time May’s played that card, so Skye has no comeback prepared. She climbs to her feet.

“Try not to hurt her any more than you already have, Agent May,” she says as she brushes past the woman towards the stairs.

She might have just set herself back even further with the woman, but if May listens and is just a little gentler with the girl, then it will be worth it.

Coulson puts her to work repairing the transceiver up in his office, and Skye takes her chance to bait him into another version of the day’s big story.

“I should be with Hannah…if you keep sending in the Cavalry, you’re bound to get a reaction.”
“Don’t call her that,” Coulson says from behind her, his tone tired but firm.

“Why not? No normal person could shoot a hundred Bahraini—“

“That’s not how it went down,” he interrupts again, and Skye keeps going, begging for her version to be corrected.

“Whatever—twenty. I just don’t understand—“

“She didn’t have a gun,” Coulson says quietly. “None of us did.”

Skye’s hands go still over her keyboard.

He doesn’t just know the story.

*He was there.*

“It wasn’t a rescue, or an assault, or whatever they say at the Academy these days,” Coulson is saying, his shoulders hunched, his tone anything but proud. “We were the Welcome Wagon, and it went south.”

Skye looks over and meets the man’s eyes in the darkness. “Remember that story you asked me to tell you someday?” he says gently, and she thinks of a quiet moment in the back of an SUV months ago. She nods.

“How did it happen?”

He tells her about a civilian girl, a gifted individual, a SHIELD team, a building—all part of a problem that May had insisted that she could fix, though Coulson had never found out how.

“May used to be different,” Coulson says, and Skye is reminded all over again of how much their situations have in common. She opens her mouth to ask if that’s when the other significant change had happened for May, when suddenly his door slams shut and an extremely corporal ghost smashes their walkie on his desk.

“Let her out!” the ghost roars with his very-much-solid wrench wrapped around Skye’s neck.

*May:*

It’s not a demon—it’s a man caught between worlds. Under different circumstances, May might want to sit him down to swap stories and figure things out, but at this point, she’s had about enough of him fucking up her plane.

“He can’t get to Hannah!” Simmons is saying into the walkie, locked in a closet somewhere below deck. “Maybe though, if we wait it out, he’ll disappear fully!”

But May knows better than to leave the safety of her team on the unknown variable of a supernatural being. She knows better now.

There’s really only one thing to do.

She slips through the plane like a shadow and scares Hannah into silence before opening the door and dragging the girl from the plane.

“I don’t mean to scare you,” May says as she marches the girl into a barn half a kilometer away. “I
just need to use you as bait.”

“Then what will you do?” the girl stammers, her deferred tears starting to break out.

“Whatever I have to,” May answers, turning back towards the plane to wait for the man.

It takes less than a minute for the ghost to appear.

For a non-corporal presence, his fists and wrench are incredibly solid as May collides with him again and again. She takes the wrench to the spine and then to the shins because he has the unfairest of advantages—moving rapidly around her without having to move—and it doesn’t take long for him to knock her to the ground. She barely manages to rouse herself before the man drags Hannah out of the barn, but then she sees him leave the fight to throw himself in front of a falling beam to protect the girl.

Oh. So it’s like that.

Well, that makes everything so much simpler.

Hannah rushes to her side, clinging to May’s shoulders in fear, but May turns the girl to face the ghost.

“Tell him I won’t hurt you,” she orders, and suddenly everything changes.

“Can you forgive me?” the man begs Hannah from his knees in the dirt after confessing to the scheme that had killed his coworkers and trapped him in this purgatory.

“Only God can forgive you,” Hannah says certainly, the calmest she’s been in hours.

May doesn’t think she believes in God, not if the rules of the universe are so easily bent by people like this man (and herself), but she knows what Tobias needs to hear.

“You can’t undo what’s been done. That will be with you forever. But trying to hold onto this life? Clinging to the person you thought you could be? That’s hell. And you’re dragging her down with you.”

She sees the Golden Retriever hovering outside the barn and knows that time is running out.

“You have to let go,” she tells the man, “before my people come and make you do it. If you care about her—and I know you do—let her go. Let the girl go, Tobias.”

He meets her eyes and reaches for Hannah’s hand. The girl isn’t afraid to take it.

“Let the girl go,” May urges him.

He does.

Skye:

Coulson has some encouraging words for her after Skye has tucked Hannah in her bunk, sleeping peacefully for what Skye is guessing is the first time in days.

“Someday, you could be really good at this,” he says with a smile, referring to the intake process.

“I hope we won’t have too many more incidents like this,” Skye confesses, “but you said that every
situation’s different.”

“And they can happen in the strangest of ways,” he responds.

Their eyes meet, and she knows they’re thinking about the same person.

“Do you think I should tell May that I know?” she asks quietly, leaning on the holocom.

Coulson shakes his head. “As always, that’s up to you. But personally, I always prefer to hear stories from their sources.”

He leaves her with that.

May doesn’t respond when Skye knocks on the cockpit door a little while later, so she lets herself in.

“Mind if I keep you company?” she asks, standing uncertainly over the woman’s shoulder.

May doesn’t respond, doesn’t even look her way, but Skye steels herself and steps into the uncertain space between them.

“Cool.”

She climbs into the co-pilot’s seat, carefully avoiding the various control panels, levers, and pedals around her by drawing her feet up onto the chair and wrapping her arms around her calves. The rotating turbines whir, and with the steady motions of May’s hands, the plane lifts into the air. Soon, the farmland spreads out beneath them, and as they break through the cloudcover, suddenly all Skye can see is the endless stretch of night, a sky full of stars.

It’s beautiful.

She doesn’t know how long she sits there in silence, a stretch that just might be a personal record for her, debating where to start. When she finally takes a deep breath though and pushes every iota of courage she has towards her voicebox, her voice still comes out only decibels above a whisper.

“I want to tell you a story,” she says looking over at May, “and I’d really appreciate it if you would just listen until the end, okay?”

When the woman beside her doesn’t shake her head or order her out of the room, Skye takes another fortifying breath and begins, staring out at the sky ahead of them.

“I got bumped around a lot, growing up,” she says quietly, a carousel of foster homes flashing through her mind. “I never lived anywhere more than 8 months, and I never knew where I was headed next. A childhood like that will do things to you, but I didn’t know for a long time that I was different. I thought every kid got shuffled like this, got passed around like a collection plate for people to drop issues into. I think I was seven before I caught on to the fact that not every kid got re-housed twice a school year. But on top of that…until that point, I had also thought that every kid had a friend who went everywhere they went—a time-traveler who always found them, no matter what.”

She glances over at May again, but the woman continues to stare straight ahead, her hands steady on the controls. Skye keeps her eyes on May as she continues.

“I don’t think I believe in God, but I do think I can believe in some kind of plan that’s out there, working itself out in our lives. Maybe everyone’s got it right—maybe it is God, and maybe it’s love, or maybe it’s some power that just wants us to all have a chance at that…but I think that your presence…it was the most divine thing in my life. Somehow, you almost always seemed to arrive
At this, May’s eyes finally shift over for the briefest moment, a look in them that seems torn between frustration and understanding. Skye’s lips turn into a small smile, and she doesn’t look away even as May faces the front again.

“What I’m saying, May, is…to me, the name suits you. You’ve always been that last line of help for me. But Coulson just told me why others call you that, and—”

“And now you know why I time travel.”

The words are so quiet that Skye could almost believe that she imagined them. But she saw May’s lips move, saw the way her jaw tightened as she closed her mouth again, and she knows that her suspicions were correct.

**Bahrain was it.**

Bahrain was the Bad Thing, the event that had left a scar on her leg and begun the rest of May’s life—the part that is woven into Skye’s own, hopelessly entangled by a divine hand.

She thinks of the vague details that Coulson gave her and dares to ask for more.

“How did it happen? How did going into that building in Bahrain lead to…this?”

She asks not sure that May will give her anything—one revelation is more than enough for one day—so Skye’s heart leaps in her chest as May exhales slowly…and answers.

“I can’t explain it. I don’t know if anyone can.” The words sound rusty, clinking stiffly against each other. “But *something* happened when the Gifted died. I can’t be sure if it was intentional or not, but it was as though whatever power that person had had was all directed at me in one single…surge. All I remember was pain. And by the time I was aware of anything else, I was…dislodged.”

“How did it happen? How did going into that building in Bahrain lead to…this?”

May closes her eyes. “From everything.”

“You traveled,” Skye says, not a question. “…That was the first time.”

May’s eyes open as she gives a small shake of her head. “I barely remember it, but I think I saw the ceiling of the kitchen of the house I was living in at the time. I was only gone for thirteen seconds, and then I was back in the building in Bahrain, but I’d been waiting my whole life for that moment, so I understood what had happened.”

Skye feels her brow furrowing. “If it happened so fast, how do you know—thirteen seconds?”

She sees May bite her lip. It takes her a long time to reply, and when she does, it’s barely a whisper. “Because I’ve been there again since then.”

Skye fights the urge to reach over the controls and touch May’s hand, remembering the response that gesture had earned in her van only two months ago, so she settles for moving on.

“How long ago did it happen?”

May shrugs with one shoulder, though Skye is certain she knows the moment to the hour. “A few
years ago. 2008.”

Skye nods, connecting the dots.

*Commendation of Distinguished Service.*

*Transfer to Administration.*

“And that was when you left the field?”

May nods. “It wouldn’t have been responsible to endanger anyone else by disappearing in the middle of something important.”

Skye looks across the space between them. “But that wasn’t the only reason.”

Three breaths before she answers. “No.”

The magic seems to be lasting, so Skye dares to ask more questions, some that she’s asked before, years ago, but she wonders if the answers will be different now. “Where else do you travel?”

May flips a few switches and then withdraws her hands from the controls. The plane remains steady on autopilot as the woman leans back in her chair, barely turning towards Skye. “Mostly places that were ‘return points’ for me, like the houses I grew up in. The Academy. My office in the Triskellion. The house I shared with my husband. Sometimes, though, they’re places that I don't recognize and I don't have the heart to ask about, which usually turn out to be places in my future. Lately, though, that’s meant traveling to you.”

Skye’s lips pull into an involuntary smile. “Do you time travel forward often?”

May shakes her head, still staring out at the night ahead of them. “Not anywhere near as much as I travel to the past. It seems like the past has a bigger draw on me. Or at least the people there do.”

Skye feels herself smile again. “Like stars?”

May looks over at her, a thousand lights from the control panel reflected in her eyes, and Skye knows that she understands.

“Maybe.”

They lapse into a peaceful silence as the plane continues to streak through the night, back towards Utah where they will drop the girl off at her home. Skye thinks of the whole mess that brought them here—a man accidentally tearing through a junction between worlds and losing himself in the process—and thinks again of that plan that somehow continues to amaze her, twenty years on.

“I do, you know,” May says suddenly, quietly, and Skye glances over to see May still staring through the windshield, her arms wrapped around herself, her head tipped back against the seat. “Sympathize. I know what it’s like to be terrified of something that you can’t control, something that is happening to you that you can’t stop. That’s still how it is for me—five years down the road, I can limit the traveling in some ways, but I can’t stop it. I still don’t have any control over it—I can’t make myself go, and I can’t make myself stay.”

Skye feels her heart twisting itself into knots in her chest, and she smiles against the pain because this is just a miracle—this many words, this much truth...

“That’s how it feels right now, Skye,” May finally says, looking over at her. “I know you’re
disappointed with the person you’ve found, and I can understand that. Someday, I’ll be that person you met throughout your life, but I can’t rush this, even if I wanted to. The visits, the memories, the changes…they will happen when they happen. Your past…it’s still my future. It will happen. It already did.”

Skye is transfixed, unable to believe the stream of words that she’s hearing from this woman, and she once again fights the urge to reach over and touch her, if only to confirm that this is real. Instead, she just smiles through the darkness at her until May suddenly rises from her seat and goes to one of the cabinets, where Skye watches her pull out a small envelope from a crevice amidst the blinking switches and readouts. The woman sits down again and pulls out the familiar piece of paper, smoothing it out on the steering yoke and producing a pen.

“Two down,” May says quietly, marking today’s date beside a date on the paper, and Skye’s heart swells. “Twenty-six to go.”

She passes it to Skye, who sees her hazy memory confirmed—the last visit before the two-and-a-half-year stretch was only the second visit for May, back when she hadn’t yet memorized the List…

But the worst is over, she reminds herself. May will have to experience that next visit eventually, but you already know how it will end. It’s too late to change how things went…but the worst is over.

For all the separations, she and May have finally found each other, and the leaving and being left are done. Even better, Skye knows what else will happen—what has already happened in May’s future.

Too late to change that either.

Skye smiles as she passes the paper back to May, and maybe it’s only accident that their fingers brush, but the rush of warmth goes straight to Skye’s cheeks.

“We’re coming up on Batesville,” May says, tucking the envelope inside her jacket. “You ought to go wake up Hannah.”

As dismissals go, this one hurts the least of any Skye has ever received. She murmurs a quiet assent and climbs out of the co-pilot’s seat, making her way to the cockpit’s door.

“And Skye?” the pilot calls after her, and Skye turns back.

May points at the atomic clock on the control panel, the numbers just flipping over to 12:00 am, 11/11/2013.

“Happy birthday,” the woman says quietly, the faintest of smiles barely visible in the half-light.

For Skye, it might as well be a supernova.

She smiles back with everything left in her.

“Thank you.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to Book_freak for her beta-reading and patience. :)
When she was younger, Skye had spent a lot of time wondering what her mother might be like.

In those early years of foster homes, she had gone into each one with eager eyes, looking for the ways that she might one day fit into this family. She would do her best to immediately soak in every detail she could see in the home, the parents, the pets, the children, looking for the unoccupied space where she might be welcome. She had looked for the roles that each kid already present filled and tried to fit around them, complementing or compensating, desperate to fit into whatever niche she was allowed in. With the parents, she got good at reading dress style, tone, and word choice, to the point where she could tell from the first conversation whether this was the kind of home where homework had to be completed before dinner or where television time was unlimited.

Whether she would admit it or not, she was constantly editing her imagining of the woman who had once left her behind. Would she be more like the stricter parents Skye had seen? More gentle and tender? Would she have been interested in her life? Was she tall? Short? Younger? Older? Was she beautiful?

After the constant turnover of homes had taken the shine off those questions, though, Skye had spent more and more time wondering why she was in the foster system at all. Her constant interstate re-housing meant that her caseworkers changed as often as her homes did, but one thing they all had in common was a complete lack of information on her family. On everything really—date of birth, place of birth, birth name, next of kin, living relatives…

*Unknown, unknown, unknown.*

*An object of unknown origin.*

May had been equally unhelpful when Skye had demanded the same information from the woman during those once-frequent visits, which meant that for close to twenty years, Skye had struggled with the inevitable questions—*Why didn’t my parents want me? Why couldn’t they keep me? Why didn’t they ever come back for me?*—but in the end, it was better to imagine a story that she could swallow, one she could tell herself whenever self-pity rose up and blackened her thoughts. So she had told herself that her parents *had* to leave—that they were doing something important, something that they would explain to her someday, something that just wasn’t safe for a little girl to be part of.

She had quit telling herself that story by the time she was fourteen…but now, as she hunches over her laptop in her bunk on the bus and scrolls through another agent’s file on her laptop, Skye wonders if maybe she wasn’t too far off-base after all.

“Katherine Shane?” Coulson reads over her shoulder after he comes in to let her know about a mission briefing. Katherine Shane is short but obviously smart and skilled based on her clearance level, and though the photo in her file seems a little out of date based on her age, Skye is certain that the woman must still be very beautiful. She immediately jumps on Coulson for details about the woman, explaining why she’s looking at her file.

“Even if Shane was the agent who dropped you off at the orphanage,” Coulson reminds her, “it
doesn’t mean she’s your mother. You’re still looking at a long road.”

Skye takes her chance to appeal to his goodwill.

“It would be a lot shorter if I could access more files. Maybe you could remove my internet nanny?” She lifts her arm and rattles the bangle on her wrist for effect.

Coulson only purses his lips as he shakes his head. “You’re not getting that off just yet, but I asked May to look into the more restricted files.”

This news throws Skye.

“I was kind of hoping to keep this private…” she stammers, trying to figure out why he would have asked, or why May would have agreed to help.

If Coulson notices something off in her response, he doesn’t comment on it. “Agent May specializes in private,” he needlessly reminds her. He pats her shoulder, then gestures her out the bunk’s door. “Let’s go.”

They’re looking at security footage of an assault on a prison where the inmate who was probably voted Most Likely To Stab Your Eyes Out For Looking At Him Funny was broken out by three soldiers with Centipede implants on their arms. While Coulson talks about the mission (Centipede… again…) Skye lets her eyes drift over to May, who is still glistening with a faint sheen of sweat from her and Ward’s sparring session that Coulson had pulled them from.

May had never intentionally let Skye misunderstand the situation—when Skye finally mustered up the courage at age ten to ask May point-blank if she was her mother, the woman had been so visibly startled by the question that Skye had immediately wished that she hadn’t asked at all.

No, I’m not your mother, May had answered simply, easily delivering an earth-shattering truth, clearly unaware of its gravity. I’ve never had a child.

That conversation that followed had ended with tears, and May had pulled Skye into her arms and apologized profusely for not making sure that she knew that sooner. But even then, the woman had still refused to tell Skye anything else that she knew.

It had sometimes felt like May did know something, but when she got older, Skye understood enough to remind herself that just because May had said one thing in 1998 didn’t mean that the May who visited her in 2008 knew that particular piece of information yet. That was frustrating, almost unbearably so, and it wasn’t until Skye was nearly an adult that May slipped her the first real hint about what Skye would one day find out about her parents. It hadn’t been much, but it had been something. Something that had eventually brought Skye to SHIELD…and to May.

Who is apparently now working from the other side of things to find answers, as though trying to meet Skye in the middle.

Strange.

A light tap on her elbow yanks Skye back to the present, and she catches Coulson’s eye as she looks away from May (God, Skye, could you be any more obvious?) and back to him, focusing again on what he’s telling the team.

“…so SHIELD is sending in back-up. Someone who can help us fight fire with fire.”

“Somebody we’ve worked with before?” Skye asks, forcing herself back into the discussion.
“Not exactly,” Coulson says, a subtle twinkle in his eye. He looks across the table at their pilot. “May, set a course for Alexandria. We’re going to pick up Mike Petersen.”

November 16, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 24

Coming back to a SHIELD base on the east coast might have felt like a homecoming under other circumstances, but May can barely muster the patience to keep things organized as SHIELD employees restock the plane while Coulson goes to meet with Mike Petersen. Fitz and Simmons had headed into the SciTech building to restock the Bus’s lab, and Ward had taken Skye with him to show her the armory while he picked up arms and ammunition.

May wouldn’t want anyone else overseeing her task, but she can’t help but feel like she’s drawn the short straw for their morning.

“That needs to go in the closet on the left,” she directs a worker after reading the tag on his crate. “Unpack it onto the portside shelves.”

“Stow that in the Lab’s temperature-controlled room.”

“That needs to go upstairs.”

They had landed the night before, and though Coulson had given their team the option of moving into the base for the night, they had all ended up sleeping on the plane anyway, for simplicity’s sake.

Or at least, May had tried to sleep on the plane.

Though she’s not sure what time it was that she disappeared, the time she had spent in the past last night had been a longer stretch than usual—nearly half a day. When she had finally tumbled back onto the floor of her bunk, dawn had just been creeping in through the open hangar doors. She had desperately wanted to climb back into bed and sleep just another hour, but Maintenance was due in at 7:30, and there was barely time to get dressed before Ward was knocking on her door telling her that the workers had arrived.

Now, as she fights the urge to rest her head on the lab table, she can barely rally herself enough to turn and look towards the ramp when she hears the sound of a Corvette’s motor echoing through the hangar.

Coulson guides his car gracefully up the ramp, and workers immediately lay wheel-stops as he climbs out.

“How’s everything coming along?” he asks, joining her at the top of the ramp and glancing at the thermos in her hand. “Long night?”

“I spent my whole night navigating my high school in Philadelphia—on a school day, no less—probably sometime in the nineties, based on the amount of hair gel and plaid that I saw,” May mutters just loud enough for him to hear, half-hiding her comment behind her rim of her thermos of green tea. “For just once, I would like a decent night’s sleep where I don’t have to wake up in a choose-your-own-adventure…”

The day (night?) had involved a terrifying moment of appearing in an empty school hallway and sprinting for the nearest bathroom, persuading a gullible student to loan her the gym uniform from her backpack and not tell any teachers that she’d seen a naked woman in the bathroom, picking a couple of lockers in search of cash while dodging hall monitors, and then biding her time in the bathroom until lunch period, when she joined the seniors swarming out the doors for lunch before
jogging off campus. She had barely eaten half of her bagel from the nearest gas station before time had finally remembered to yank her back to 2013, just in time to start a day again.

*Can you call it a long night if it was never really a night?*

“Hang in there, May, and promise that you’ll let me know if I can do anything to help,” Coulson encourages quietly, knowing full well that there’s nothing to be done about the situation but drink caffeine and pray for an easy day.

She glances back down the ramp as another SUV rolls up and Petersen himself climbs out. “This is a bad idea…” she mutters before realizing that she’s thinking out loud.

Coulson almost chuckles.

“Well, while I have you in a good mood,” he begins, watching down the ramp with her, “you should know that Skye’s trying to ID the agent that dropped her off at the orphanage.”

*Oh yes, this is just what today needed…*

“We agreed to protect her from the truth,” Coulson is saying, and May remembers the gruesome photos she saw last month, “so I told her that you were looking into it. She might come to you.”

May manages not to roll her eyes by directing her glare at Petersen.

“One mistake at a time.”

Petersen is friendly enough, but May walks away without a word—she doesn’t trust herself to say anything polite.

They eventually head to Cleveland, and Coulson and Ward take off to track down a Centipede soldier’s sister as soon as they taxi into a hangar at CLE. May is hoping for a nap in the cockpit while they wait for the guys to come back, but after only maybe an hour, Skye’s voice over the intercom jolts her awake.

“May? Could you come out to the holocom? I found something you probably ought to see.”

Unsure that this will be something worth waking her up for but unwilling to forego finding out, May heaves herself out of the pilot’s seat and makes her way out to the cabin.

Skye is tucked behind her laptop in one of the booths, but she jumps up as May walks in, pulling a thumb-drive out of her laptop as she shuts it quickly.

“Hey!” she says, all but bounding up to May like an eager puppy. “Coulson told me you were helping to find my long-lost folks, so…thanks. I’m glad you’re in on this with me. It means a lot.”

Skye’s smile seems sincere, but May says nothing because it’s safer than opening her mouth. She’s not sure if she’d even be coherent—she’s sure that she wouldn’t be kind.

And the girl seems to process this immediately.

“Right, I can tell you’re really into this,” Skye says, dropping her eyes, and if May could feel any emotion other than *tired*, she might have felt a little bit bad. “Well, I’ve done a lot of the heavy lifting already, came up with a short list, I thought—“

“We’re on a mission, Skye,” May cuts her off, saying the simplest truthful statement to make the girl stop talking. “Is this why you called me here?” *Please tell me you did not wake me up for this.*
Skye looks a little offended by the accusation. “No. I was just working on this while I waited for you. I called you here because I found something about Poe.”

May’s ears perk up. “Show me.”

They look at a security feed of the man talking to a girl in a flower dress that Petersen identifies as Raina, using the lip-reading program to identify a single phrase:

The Clairvoyant does not like to be touched.

“The Clairvoyant,” May repeats, making sure that she heard right.

We don’t believe in ESP, remember?

“They couldn’t have a psychic,” Coulson says over the phone a few minutes later. There are none on the Index. They’re a myth.”

Skye’s eyes shift pointedly to May. “So is—“ and here May must have given her a chart-topping glare, because Skye quickly looks away and finishes the sentence with “…Thor.”

Ward and Coulson’s scam works, and the girl it the University calls her brother’s phone to tell him they didn’t win the lottery.

“He’s in Oakland, California,” Coulson says over the phone, and May fights the urge to sigh.

Coast to coast today…

May climbs back into the pilot’s seat as soon as the guys get back and points their plane towards the west coast. She gets forty-five minutes of sleep with the plane on autopilot before they start their descent.

Skye:

Coulson, Mike, Ward, and May all head into the building suspected of being Centipede’s most recent lab while Skye runs surveillance with Fitz and Simmons. She doesn’t see the actual fight go down, can only go off of what she hears on their comms and what she sees from Mike’s uniform’s readout. Their own supersoldier is outnumbered three to one, but something seems to happen to turn the tide in their team's favor.

Coulson doesn’t get an answer out of Hayward, so it is more than a little confusing to see their team return to the car with the dead soldier draped across Ward’s shoulders.

“Not to alarm you,” Coulson says as they pile back into the van and Jemma immediately starts tending to Mike’s abdominal wound, “but corpses with illegal technology have a habit of walking away. Fitz, call in HQ. We’ll get this guy examined on the plane before they arrive and then hand him over.”

Skye spends all of thirty seconds in the plane’s lab watching Simmons patch up Mike before she bolts. There might come a day when she can look at open wounds or oozing blood and not feel sick to her stomach, but she hasn’t reached that point yet.

She has her reasons.

As she drifts upstairs and back towards her bunk, however, she can hear May snapping at someone,
louder than Skye has ever heard her speak.

“You—taking a punch for me?” Okay, she’s talking to Ward… “I don’t need your protection.”

“You think I don’t know that? I took that punch because you’re faster than me. You can do more good on your feet. It was tactical. Not personal.”

Why would it be personal?

There’s a beat of silence as Skye shifts around the holocom room toward the bar, where she can see Ward smirking down at May. Skye quickly shifts back into the shadows, in case he looks over May’s shoulder.

“My mistake,” May is saying, her volume lower now.

“I am not some recruit who can’t separate church from state,” Ward says, leaning on the bar and staring May down. “I’m on the same page as you. So don’t flatter yourself.” He picks up his beer and brushes past May, heading down the opposite hall towards his bunk.

Skye can’t move, can’t even think.

...What?

Just. What?

She...they...they're...this can't be real life...

She knows she should leave, turn and walk away before May turns around and sees her, but something tells Skye that May will hear her anyway, and she’d rather cut right to the chase.

“Sorry,” she blurts out, and May spins sharply over one shoulder. “I didn’t mean to crash.”

The woman’s eyes narrow. “What do you want?” she snaps. “Is this about that thumb-drive again?” May is shifting towards Skye, but her shoulders are back, oblique to Skye.

Battle stance.

“No,” Skye responds bluntly, letting her tone harden.

She has no idea, she reminds herself, fighting against the flames rising up inside her chest. She has no idea why this would hurt you...

“Good.” May faces her fully, and Skye wonders if she’s actively trying to intimidate her.

“Look, I get that you don’t want to help with that,” she snaps, letting her shock and anger unspool in her rising volume, “loud and clear with big neon flashing lights, but I didn’t ask! Okay? Coulson—“

But May cuts her off with a barely-there roll of her eyes. “Coulson doesn’t want to tell you the truth,” she says, once again delivering a truth-bomb with such flippancy that it seems like she has no idea what she’s doing. “The truth is—“

And here the woman finally remembers herself, her sentence snagging on whatever subconscious keeps her following protocol at all times. Skye is barely breathing, waiting for the rest of that statement.

The truth is what? What do you both know?
What are you both keeping from me?

But May is pushing forward, physically and metaphorically. “You need to decide why you’re here.” Her gaze on Skye feels like the point of a knife. “We have a mission, and it’s not to find your parents.”

Skye's mouth opens, but she can't make any words come out.

But…that was always the point, May. That’s what you told me…

May’s steps have brought her right in front of Skye now, close enough to hit, close enough to touch, close enough to feel the fine-line cuts of her words. “If you can’t put aside your personal attachments,” May says, drilling into Skye with her words and her gaze, “then you shouldn’t be here.”

May gets the last word because Skye can’t speak as the woman turns and walks away, disappearing into the darkness on her way back towards the cockpit. It takes Skye three seconds to pull herself together, four seconds to stride across the cabin and into her bunk, three seconds to look at the printouts of the female agents and decide to double the number of pieces of paper in her hands. She had torn the List in the same way once, long ago, in another time and place. She didn’t think she would ever again be as mad at May as she had been that day, but this moment is proving her wrong.

Fuck you, May. This has always been personal.

She remembers too late to close her door before anyone else could see her shred the documents in her hands, but once she’s slid her door shut and locked it, she sinks into her mattress and buries her tears in her pillow, hating that after twenty years, May can still look her in the eye and withhold the one thing Skye has always needed since this all began twenty years ago:

To know the truth.

To understand.

May:

She doesn’t know how long she gets to sleep on the floor against the door of the cockpit with her head and arms propped on her folded legs, but she’s roused from her catnap by the intercom on the ceiling crackling on at max volume.

“All agents—common area, right now,” Coulson’s voice orders, the subtle change in his tone warning her that something has just gone horribly wrong, and she manages to only groan once to herself before climbing to her feet.

Raina has Petersen’s son. Centipede is holding him hostage in exchange for Petersen himself. May tries to insist on a hostage-rescue support team, but the woman’s instructions were clear—no comms, no weapons, no electronic equipment, and no extra agents. But May knows the team she assembled, even if she doesn’t know their enemies.

They can make this work.

FitzSimmons have a virtual Bloodhound system to help track Petersen. Ward can get a sniper’s surveillance spot and watch through a rifle scope in case things get fishy. Coulson will walk up with Petersen.
May can’t think of any reason for Skye to come along until the man looks at her and says, “I’m going to need you to take care of my boy.” And May finally remembers that Skye was the only one the boy knew as a person, not an agent.

The rendezvous point is a bridge under construction near the coast. Coulson keeps silent while May drives then out, adrenaline forcing any lingering sleepiness from her system.

“If things go south, I need you taking point on the team,” Coulson says quietly as she parks the car.

“I don’t like any of this,” she says unnecessarily.

“There’d be something wrong with you if you did.”

She stays in the car with the other three kids, watching the soundless drama play out a hundred yards away as Petersen and Coulson walk out onto the bridge and talk to a tiny woman in a flower dress who is accompanied by one of the soldiers May fought earlier this afternoon.

“On my mark, activate comms and tracker,” May orders Fitz as the man’s young son appears from a sedan parked on the opposite side of the bridge and sprints towards his father, who scoops him up in his arms.

But then something goes wrong, and it’s Petersen racing back towards the car with Ace while Coulson suddenly goes limp and is flanked by the supersoldiers and dragged towards the other car.

“What happened?” Ward is shouting into his comm. “They took Coulson! Call it in! We need backup!”

May is leaping out of the car after Skye, grabbing her radio off the dash.

“Do not engage!” she orders Ward. “They’ll kill Coulson! Stand down and I’ll contact HQ!” She switches channels, her heart picking up speed. “SHIELD HQ this is SHIELD RG24—we need immediate satellite support!”

Petersen runs up to Skye and deposits his son in front of her, pressing his hand into hers. “I gotta go make something right. Take care of my boy!”

The last words are shouted over his shoulder as he turns and sprints back towards the car on the other side of the construction equipment.

Four seconds later, the world explodes.

May barely registers Skye’s scream as the girl grabs the child up into her arms and hides his face in her shoulder.

Don’t look. Don’t look.

Everything is on fire. It’s the only thing moving.

“Where’s Coulson?” Ward is demanding over the radio as the flames clear just enough to see the car that the other players had climbed out of. She’s in charge, but she has no idea what to do now.

Run in and chase them? Tell Ward to take the shot?

In the end, she doesn’t have to choose.

As the car in front of them explodes with another shockwave that she feels all the way in her
bones, May ceases to breathe.

_No. No._

_Not him._

_Not again._

Her head swims. Her world tips. And before her knees hit the ground, May does what she hasn’t done in over a year.

Wide awake, she disappears.

Chapter End Notes

No promises for an update next weekend—I’ll be on the road for most of the next week and at a conference for the weekend. Hold on for a feelsfest in chapter 17 though. I promise there are happier Moments coming.

Thanks as always for keeping up with this story! It makes me so happy to know that there are people who enjoy reading as much as I’m enjoying writing.
November 16, 2013: Skye is 24, May is 44

When the first explosion happened, Skye had screamed. Panic had pushed everything out of her in one sound, and she barely had the presence of mind to grab Ace and hide his face in her shoulder to keep him from turning around to see…see his father go up in flames…

“Where’s Coulson?” Ward is demanding through May’s radio. No one says anything, but they all look towards the sedan behind the fires, the car that had held Raina, her soldiers, and even Ace until two minutes ago…

Skye can barely make out the shape of the car through the shimmering heat before there is another burst of sound, power, and heat…

This time, she doesn’t scream. She can’t even breathe.

No…no…no…

“Oh my God…Coulson…”

She doesn’t need to turn around to know that her team’s faces must all mirror her own—shock, pain, and panic all competing in their features. She lowers the boy in her arms to his feet but keeps his face turned away from the fire, blocking him from everything with her hands and her body, but she can’t look away even as the heat and smoke and shock soak her eyes with tears.

_Did they mean to do that? Was this just an accident?_

_Why drag him away and not just kill him on the spot?_

_Coulson…oh my God…Coulson…_

But suddenly through the ringing in her ears, she can hear something else.

On the other side of the smoke, a helicopter rises, lifting itself quickly above the scene and banking towards the tower where Ward is supposed to be hiding in sniper position.

_Thank God._

Skye has no time to feel relieved, though—machine gun fire rings out from the aircraft, sparks flying up where the bullets bounce off the guardrails.

In May’s radio, they hear Ward cry out in surprise.

_Oh please no, not him too…_

And then the helicopter is gone, and everything but the fires is quiet again.

Simmons speaks first, her voice horribly similar to the day last month when she almost died—pragmatism the thin thread holding her composure together.
“Was that Ward? Did everyone hear that too?”

Skye finally turns around, steering Ace back towards the car, refusing to let him look over his shoulder. Fitz and Simmons look shellshocked but relieved, and they’re both looking around confusedly.

“A cold certainty sweeps over Skye.

May thought she just saw her friend die.

She might have…

“I think she took off to go help Ward,” Skye says quickly, rounding to the driver’s side of the car and seeing, as expected, a pile of clothes and May’s radio on the ground. She snatches up the radio and kicks the clothes and shoes under the car.

“SHIELD RG24, This is SHIELD HQ, status report? Over,” a voice is demanding urgently through the walkie.

“Here, Fitz, talk to them,” Skye orders, scrambling back to the pair of scientists and handing over the radio. “Jemma? Can you take Ace and get him in the car? Maybe you could let him fly one of the Golden Retrievers while we wait for May to come back?”

Soon, hopefully…

Skye’s hands are shaking, but Simmons’ nerves seem to have nearly combusted. She is eerily calm as she leads the boy around to the trunk of the car and starts opening cases of electronics to entertain him.

Go get May, Skye had said to Simmons the last time something had scared her this bad. But who’s going to help them now?

Go get Ward, Skye thinks, pivoting and moving mechanically towards the tower.

Get Ward, and then get SHIELD.

Skye doesn’t have a damn thing in her hands as she meets Ward stumbling out of the stairwell, his rifle slung over his back and a soaking red hand pressed against his shoulder.

“Is backup on the way?” he demands, shaking off her attempts to steady him as he strides towards the car. “Did May tell HQ?”

“But as they approach the car, Skye sees not two, but three adult figures moving around it, and one of them is May, barefoot on the asphalt, clad in only leggings and a SHIELD-issue thermal but steadily delivering orders into the walkie and to Fitz and Simmons.

“Roger that, Agent May,” a voice is saying on the radio. “Agent Hand and her team are already inbound, ETA twelve minutes. Air traffic control has been alerted, an APB is out for the chopper. Secure the perimeter and await further instructions.”

As Ward stomps up with Skye trailing behind him, May takes one look at his wound and points towards the car. “Simmons, get that bleeding stopped. Fitz, send out the Retrievers to scan the
perimeter. Skye, get in the car and stay with the boy.”

In the wavering firelight, their eyes meet for the briefest moment. Skye points to the space behind the wheel of the car where she had kicked the pile of clothes. May glances down, nods, and goes back to the radio.

“SHIELD HQ, Agent Ward is injured, we need emergency medical and local forces to set up a roadblock…”

November 18, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 24

It’s been 36 hours since Coulson was taken, and though little progress has been made, May is grateful for the presence of a higher power at her elbow, even one as brusque as Victoria Hand.

Having her old S.O. on the plane is a comfort in some ways—it means that May doesn’t have to be the one with the answers, and it means that she understands the mind that is presenting the plans for their team. Though she resents what some would say the fact implies about her personality, May has always found it far easier to take orders than to give them. And anyway, she hasn’t had enough sleep this week to trust her own judgment much at this point.

It only takes SHIELD a few hours to consolidate information and track down the next level of the Centipede conspiracy—a big-time black-market racketeer named Van Chat. Hand organizes the operation but lets May and her team take point. Ward, of course, refuses to be benched, despite the bullet wound in his shoulder, but May is thankful for the familiarity of his fighting style as the two of them take on Van Chat and his “guards” before chasing the investor towards the elevator, which Skye sends shooting towards the roof, right into Hand’s team’s riflescopes.

“Mr. Van Chat,” Agent Hand greets him coolly as she approaches the man while May relieves the man of his sidearm. “We were hoping you could help us find a friend.”

Van Chat doesn’t put up any more of a fight as he’s cuffed and loaded into the waiting chopper.

“Give yourself a nap on the ride back to the plane,” Hand mutters May as they stand shoulder to shoulder, arms folded as they watch the agents secure the prisoner. “You look like shit.”

“I’m the driver,” May reminds her in a tone sharpened from the last few days. “And I’ll sleep when we find Coulson.”

“You’re no good to anyone if you can’t think clearly,” Hand reminds her, glancing severely down at May. “And there are laws requiring pilots to sleep.”

The height difference between them has always been extreme, but May’s used to adding inches to herself with other methods of intimidation.

She stares right back at the woman, eyes narrowing in the bright sun. “Are you saying you’d call in another pilot just to make sure that you comply with FAA regulations?”

Hand’s red mouth quirks on one side, her dark eyes unchanging. It’s a calculating expression, a dare and a smirk, a smile that has never had anything in common with Phil’s.

“Agent Nesbit!” the woman calls, and one of the tactical team members immediately rushes from the chopper over to Hand’s elbow. “Agent Ward is injured and Agent May is dead on her feet,” Hand says, keeping her eyes on May even as she delivers the orders to the other agent. “Please take charge of driving Agent May’s team back to the airfield.”
“Yes ma’am,” the agent salutes, doffing his helmet and handing over his rifle to the woman.

“And don’t let this woman in the driver’s seat, even if she threatens to break both your ankles,” Hand warns, the overhead sun glinting off her glasses. “All right, let’s move!” she shouts to the rest of her team, and in seconds, they are in the chopper and gone.

The order of a nap is tempting, and May knows that she doesn’t have much pride to maintain in front of her team at this point. Disappearing on the spot after the explosion two days ago had been too, too close. She had found herself standing in the backyard of one of her childhood houses again, the one in Oklahoma City, but it was after dark, and she hadn’t realized where she was until she had taken two blind steps forward and crashed into an aluminum trashcan, knocking it over with a crash.

The neighbor’s dog had begun to bark, the kitchen light had come on, and May had bolted for the fence, forgoing clothes in favor of getting out of the yard before anyone could look through the back door of the house.

She had been halfway down the back alley before she had been yanked back to 2013, barely catching her balance on the asphalt before she thudded into the siding of the car. The fires on the bridge were still burning as she’d leapt into the backseat of the SUV and snatched her bundle of extra clothes out from under the driver’s seat, barely getting the leggings and shirt on before someone opened the door.

“Agent May!” Simmons had gasped, her hand flying halfway to her mouth. “I thought you were— never mind. Fitz! Here she is!”

Neither of the scientists had seemed to register anything wrong. Simmons was doing her best to distract Petersen’s son with gadgets from the car, and Fitz had thrust May’s radio back at her, asking her to confirm what he had been telling HQ—that Petersen was down and likely dead, that Coulson had been taken prisoner by known Centipede associates and was most likely in a helicopter (Wait, what? Oh thank God…) headed west from their location, and no, we couldn’t see any call numbers on the aircraft—it was black, that’s all I got…

It’s been 36 hours now, though, and she still hasn’t slept. She’s running on fumes of caffeine and adrenaline, knowing that she’s absolutely asking for the worst to happen again…She can’t risk traveling again with this many agents crawling around, with this urgent of a situation around them.

But May is also afraid that nodding off in the car will send her tumbling elsewhen, so when she puts her head down against the seat in front of her, she keeps her eyes braced open with her fingertips and simply works through her breathing exercises from tai chi, hoping that even if she’s not doing the movements, the awareness it brings will help anchor her to the present.

Ward is breathing intentionally slow next to her, and May can smell by the blood in the air that his stitches have reopened. She sends him directly to the lab when they roll up to the Bus, where they see their back-end agents already in lab coats again.

“Make sure these stitches hold this time,” May mutters to Simmons, an unfair admonishment, she knows. “And don’t you dare come upstairs until she’s finished,” she warns Ward with a glare.

Simmons nods silently, pursing her lips as she cleans out the wound again, and Ward just sighs and directs his gaze towards the ceiling. “Copy that,” he exhales, and May’s heart tightens with concern.

She knows that all her agents are hovering in the same state of exhaustion that she is, but she also knows that they don’t want to waste time any more than she does. Everything else can wait until they get Coulson back.
Ward makes it to the holocom with a clean shirt while Hand runs yet another briefing with the ever-growing crowd of agents taking up space in their plane. The woman had raised an eyebrow knowingly when May had planted herself directly at her elbow on the leader side of the table, but May knows where she belongs.

This was her team first.

They’re only two minutes into the meeting when an alarm sounds from the holocom in front of them.

“We’ve got a security breach,” Hand mutters, her hands snapping over the controls. “Someone’s hacking the system.”

Her eyes go immediately to May’s, who purses her lips and throws her own glare at Ward.

*Here we go...*

Skye is cross-legged on her bed in front of her open laptop when Hand slides open her bunk door.

“Just in time,” May hears her say from the behind Hand. “Can you override this?” There’s a clink of her tracking bracelet against the buttons of her shirtcuff.

“What do you think you’re doing?” Hand demands, not loudly, not angrily, but May hears the challenge all the same.

“The money trail is our key to finding Coulson,” Skye says patiently, pointing towards her laptop screen. “I just need to gain access to Van Chat’s financials...”

“You’re the consultant—“ Hand interrupts, her words still in the same measured tone she is so good at maintaining, “the one who shot Agent Sitwell? I want you off this plane immediately.”

The woman turns on her heel and brushes past May on her way back towards the holocom, ending the discussion.

Ward manages to speak first. “What?”

May closes her eyes and takes a deep breath, already knowing how this is going to end.

But Skye is already out of her bunk and scurrying after Hand, seeming completely unaware of the sheer power she is trying to argue with. “Wait, I know I’m not some badass field agent like May or Ward, but this is what I do! You can’t just kick me off this mission!”

Surprisingly, Hand turns to face the girl, and May puts out a hand to stop Ward a few feet behind Skye.

“Listen,” Skye is saying earnestly, staring up at the woman, “I’ll do whatever you say. All this protocol crap doesn’t matter to me. All that matters is Coulson.”

May keeps her features carefully still, an idea forming in her mind.

*If she’s telling the truth, this might be the chance she needs to prove herself.*

*If she’s just pandering again, then this is the chance I need to get her off the plane for good.*

“Well, this ‘protocol crap’ matters to me,” Hand is responding bluntly to Skye. “You’re a distraction, and you’re gone.”
“Agent Hand,” Ward cuts in, stepping past May, “I know Skye’s methods are unorthodox, but she’s a member of this team. She can help.”

May can’t stop her brow from furrowing.

*Oh, so now no one’s allowed to pick on her except you, Ward?*  
*Guess I’ll be hearing from you later…*

But, as May expected, Hand’s gaze slides right past Ward to land on her.

“Agent May, in your professional opinion, will this girl be of any use to us on this plane?”

May knows how this has to go. She keeps her eyes on Hand as she answers.

“No.”

Ward looks stunned. Skye looks betrayed. May lets her gaze fall as Hand orders Skye’s phone and laptop confiscated and the girl delivered to debrief.

“I’ll do it,” Ward says automatically. “I’m her S.O.”

Hand nods and marches away.

May knows this is the right thing to do. It might be the only way to give the girl the chance she needs.

It doesn’t make the heartbreak in Skye’s eyes hurt her any less.

---

**Skye:**

Ward takes her laptop and phone but tells her to leave the rest of her stuff. “Just pack an overnight bag. Hopefully, we’ll have found Coulson before your debriefing’s over. You don’t want to just unpack all over again.”

Skye tries to smile gratefully but only manages to scowl as she throws a change of clothes and her toothbrush into a purse.

_Goddammit May…Goddammit May…Goddammit May…_

Whatever loyalty she thought May had felt for her team clearly still does not extend to Skye, not at the expense of making May contradict the woman who was once her S.O.

*Forget it Skye, just forget it, worry about her later—right now, Coulson needs you…*

“I can find him, Ward,” she mutters as he escorts her out to the cargo hold.

“I believe you. I’ve seen firsthand what you can do, even without SHIELD’s resources.”

Fitz and Simmons pass her a sack lunch that does not contain a sandwich. Ward tips her off for the window of escape.

“Good luck,” he whispers before turning away.

“Don’t touch Lola,” Skye snaps at an agent as she escorts herself out.
Forget you, May…this isn’t all about you anymore.

Her damn bracelet’s power doesn’t seem to fade the further she gets from SHIELD, so even after hitchhiking into the city, she gets herself locked out of an internet café for trying to run a simple Google search.

Fine. Let’s party like it’s 1989.

She raids a magazine stand for finance magazines and learns about a certain Lloyd Rathman who probably knows the right kind of wrong people to help her out.

You want him to talk, you’re going to have to make him believe you can make good on a threat, she thinks, glancing up at a storefront window.

From the display, a black leather jacket calls her name, and Skye smirks to herself.

Dress like the job you want, not the job you have.

She picks two pockets on the street for enough cash for the jacket and a cell phone for a prop. At the last second, she snatches a pair of aviators off a sidewalk display. The yellow pages send her to the right financial district building. She watches her mark leave his car conveniently running at the valet stand.

Five seconds later, it’s hers.

Hope you’re the right kind of wrong, Mr. Rathman, she thinks again, speeding away. I was hoping you could help me find a friend.

May:

It’s impossible to find a quiet place to do tai chi when her plane is swarming with agents, but May is still the only pilot on this plane, so she’ll be damned if anyone invades this space as long as this plane belongs to her team. They’re still grounded at the Oakland hangar where they landed two days ago, at least until Van Chat gives up better intel. Skye should be somewhere better by now—May is certain that she’s not in debrief—and hopefully the rest of her agents are resting.

She herself is attempting to do something more important than resting.

There isn’t enough space for her to do any of her movements properly, but she’s trying to make it work—pushing air through her body and focusing on everything inside that isn’t at rest. Every time she closes her eyes, it’s getting harder to open them, so she’s keeping her eyes fixed ahead out the windscreen of the plane.

Hand will find something.

Skye will find something.

You’ll get him back safely.

This is going to be all right.

You did the right thing—it doesn’t matter if the others understand.

Something twists painfully inside of her, and May presses down on the feeling, using her breathing to smooth it out. She can live with the others’ resentment if it means that they find Phil sooner. She’ll
explain everything when they find him…

*If you find him*…

*No. When you find him. Alive or dead.*

She realizes too late that she’s tilting, something inside her horribly off-balance, and she tries to catch herself as she pitches forward. But instead of crashing into the back of the pilot’s chair, she’s tumbling onto a messy floor, trash and clothes and a dirty throw rug.

Absolutely not where she’s supposed to be right now.

*Shit shit shit shit shit*…

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know that was a cliffhanger and awfully similar to the last chapter, but May just can't catch a break. This chapter was already over 9000 words, but the tone of the rest of it is so different from this part that it felt right to split it here. Chapter 18 will have all the feels that I've been promising.
May 31, 2004: May is 44, Skye is 14

May grimaces and sits up on her hands and knees, grabbing the first t-shirt she sees on the floor and quickly pulling it on. She’s in a windowless bedroom with a single lamp glowing on the nightstand, where a digital clock reads 12:09. Based on the clothes on the floor and the color of the bedding, it's a teenage girl’s room, but not one that she herself has lived in.

*Which probably means…*

“Skye?” she says softly, cautiously.

No one answers, but she can hear the faint breathing of another person in the room, though it’s not the deep, even breathing of sleep. Turning towards the bed, May rises up fully onto her knees, peering over the edge of the mattress. There’s definitely someone beneath the blankets. She shifts closer.

“Skye?” she breathes.

Again, there is no reply, and for the briefest moment, May considers sneaking out without waking her. But as she pulls in a silent breath and climbs quietly to her feet, she smells something in the air that she knows too well.

She reacts instinctively, leaning over the bed and yanking back the comforter. Her eyes go first to the teenaged girl curled in a pale ball on the lime green sheets, second to the bloom of red coloring the space beside her.

*Oh my God.*

May drops onto the bed and shakes the girl’s shoulder. “Skye? Wake up! Skye!”

But Skye does not wake, and May forgets to breathe as she uncurls Skye’s body and touches her cheek, which is warm but not warm enough. She immediately checks her airway (clear) and finds the pulse in her neck (fast but weak) before sliding her hands down the girl’s arms and finding the weapon and the wound at the same time.

An even, deliberate slash across her right wrist, a black razor blade tumbling loosely out of her other hand.
May hates that she knows how to judge a person’s time to exsanguination based on the size of a blood pool, but for the first time in her life, the knowledge is a comfort. The stain spread across the bed sheets isn’t big enough to herald certain death, but it’s a no small area. This doesn’t stop her heart from trying to hammer its way out of her ribs as she rolls the girl over on her back and continues to try to shake her awake, repeating her name again and again as she scrambles for something to wrap around the wound.

By the time Skye comes around slightly, Melinda has her wrist tightly bound in a t-shirt and is holding it vertically up from the bed, perpendicular to her body while she fumbles with the tiny Nokia cell phone she found abandoned on the floor.

“911 emergency response.”

“I’ve got a teenage girl here who’s cut her own wrist—“ May hears her own voice babbling out at top speed. “I don’t have a car and we need an ambulance—I’m worried that she might have lost too much blood already…”

“Go away…”

Skye’s voice is barely more than an exhale. May’s eyes dart to the girl’s face, but her eyes are still closed.

“Skye, what’s the address here?” she asks urgently, wedging the phone between her ear and her shoulder and tapping Skye’s cheek with her free hand.

The girl does not even react to the contact. “May?” she breathes, her eyes fluttering open.

“Skye, tell me where we are so I can tell the ambulance,” she demands, leaning into Skye’s line of sight. The girl’s pale lips part slowly.

“May…stop.”

May looks down at her, certain that she heard her wrong. Skye’s eyes can’t seem to focus, swimming with the fatigue of low blood pressure, but May sees her lips still pushing out a whisper. “Please stop. Please, just go…”

“We’re dispatching an ambulance right now,” the voice on the other side of the phone is saying, oblivious to what May is hearing. “What’s your location?”

“Where are we, Skye?” May demands automatically, not releasing the pressure from the girl’s arm. “Tell me where we are.”

She feels Skye trying to pull away, her movements disturbingly weak. “Please, May, just go…please just let me…”

Oh.

Oh, God.

For a frozen moment, May cannot move, hovering above the girl, still clamping on her arm but unsure of what to do.
She doesn’t want to see you—somebody else must be coming—someone is going to help her—she lives through this…

But May already realizes what has to happen.

She lives today because you’re going to save her.

This is not how her story ends.

She leans closer to Skye’s face, even as the girl’s eyes drift shut again. “Skye, either you tell me the address here or I’m running out into the house to find someone who will.”

The girl’s head tips weakly away from May’s voice. “They’re gone…they’re gone…” she whispers, her breathing getting slower.

May tightens her grip around her wrist, her heart climbing into her throat. She drops the phone and presses her hand to the girl’s face. “Skye! Stay with me!”

Suddenly the bedroom door is flying open and May is looking at herself, fully clothed, talking rapidly to a pair of EMTs rushing in with a stretcher.

“…We don’t know how long she’s been bleeding, and she’s barely responsive,” the other woman is saying, throwing herself out of the way as the medics lay out the stretcher on the floor and immediately reach for Skye, lifting her onto it as May surrenders her hold on Skye’s wrist to a medic with a gauze wrap held at the ready. “We don’t know if she’s taken any pills or had anything to drink. She’s fourteen, she should weigh just over a hundred pounds…”

May is staring at her older self (definitely older because she has no memory of this yet…), who is wearing a not-completely-embarrassing outfit and is fishing through the mess of clothes on the floor as she talks, straightening with a pair of sweatpants in her hands and throwing them to May, who had already forgotten that she is still only half-dressed.

The EMTs are already calling stats and recommendations to each other as they lift Skye’s stretcher and hurry back through the bedroom door, the other Melinda immediately trailing after them. May yanks on the pants and chases the crowd down the short hallway to the living room of a sad-looking house, flashing red and blue lights dancing through the darkness from the street-side window.

“Here—“ The other Melinda is shoving a purse into May’s hands. “Use this information and credit card to get her admitted.”

May looks dumbly down at the purse, then back up at her older self as the other woman doffs her jacket and wraps it around May’s shoulders. “What—“

“I saw the date and called the medics as soon as I realized. Come on—you need to go with them!” May can barely think but she has the presence of mind to dig in her heels as her older self pushes her towards the front door after the EMTs.

“Jie, you know her better, you should go—“

But the other woman abruptly spins her by the shoulder and shoves May back roughly against the nearest wall, an elbow coming up to pin down the other shoulder as the breath leaves her lungs in a whoosh.

“Melinda,” the other woman hisses, crowding in so that they are eye to eye. “Stop. being. a coward. Get out there, and don’t leave her until you have to.”
And then the pressure is relieved on May’s chest, just as the clothes fall to the ground, empty.

May pulls in a deep breath, and the reality of what is happening finally crashes on her. Once again, she feels the choice—stay away, stay the same, or do the brave thing and move forward. She forces herself to breathe deeply twice, giving herself three seconds of fear before straightening her shoulders and facing the door.

*Whatever comes before or after this, right now, you’re the only person she has.*

*Now get out there and be whatever shield you can be for her.*

She grips the purse and throws herself out the front door, flying across the dewy grass on bare feet, leaping into the ambulance and pulling the vehicle’s door shut behind her.

She doesn’t look out the window for the whole speedy drive to the hospital, only watching as the EMTs work to keep Skye warm and keep her blood pressure stable.

“Do you know her blood type?” one of them asks at one point as they radio their destined hospital, and May shakes her head as she opens the purse.

There’s a piece of paper right on top, notes scribbled in her own handwriting.

“Wait, yes I do,” she says quickly. “It’s A-negative.”

The paper also includes the date, Skye’s height, weight, age, and birthday, the address that they just left (*We’re in Pittsburgh?*), and two unfamiliar names that May assumes might be the current foster parents.

Skye doesn’t wake again before they arrive at the hospital, and May is pointed towards Admitting as doctors whisk the girl’s stretcher into the emergency room.

May has to leave a lot of spaces blank on the forms that she is given, but she slips away to the pay phone outside the ER to use the phonebook to look up the numbers of the names on the piece of paper.

There’s no answer when she calls the numbers.

*Of course. You just left an empty house…*

She writes them down on the admitting form anyway.

She turns in the papers and takes a place in the waiting room leaning against the wall, staring up at the ceiling and counting grooves in the tiles. The adrenaline is starting to wear off, and now she feels the unshakeable exhaustion crowding back in.

*Stay awake…stay awake…*

No one else has arrived looking for Skye by the time a doctor comes out to the waiting room and calls for “whoever came in with the 14-year-old girl.” The scrub-clad man glances down at May’s bare feet before looking her in the eye as she approaches him.

“Are you the girl’s guardian?” he asks, taking in her deplorable appearance.

“Yes,” May lies without hesitation. She knows exactly how much information she’ll get if she says no.
The dark-haired doctor nods and gestures her to the side of the hall, where he folds his arms gravely and speaks in a low voice.

“I’m Dr. Shadid, the surgeon on duty here tonight. We’ve got your girl stitched up already, and she’s getting a second transfusion as we speak, along with some hormones and pain meds. Because she’d already lost a lot of blood, many systems in her body reacted in order to compensate, and she’ll need to stay here and recover for at least a few days. Have you already spoken to Admitting?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“Good. Then wait here while I get you some shoes, and then you can come on back and see her.”

He returns a moment later with a pair of disposable patient’s slippers, and May shoves her feet into them before mechanically following him through the bustling ER to the curtained patient cubicles in the back.

“There is a sitter with her to keep her from attacking her stitches in case she’s determined to try hurting herself again,” the doctor says as they walk. “We’ve sent for a therapist to come in and to do a psych eval, but it’s the middle of the night and we’re a little short-staffed, so he might not be here for a while.”

They stop in front of a curtained patient cubicle, where the doctor parts the curtain just enough for May to peer through. Skye is out cold in the bed, an IV and a few monitors connected to her limbs. Her skin is still worryingly pale, but May reads a steady heartbeat and safe blood pressure on the monitors.

“How long have you been the girl’s guardian?” the doctor is asking, and May turns slightly to face him.

“Not very long,” she replies, and thankfully, the man doesn’t ask for more, just folds his arms across his chest again and stares solemnly at Skye as he talks.

“Well, generally with the teenagers that we see, an injury like that isn’t the first time they’ve taken a blade to their skin, so we look for that in our initial examination too. This girl was no exception—and it looks like she’s been doing this for awhile.”

May feels sick but makes herself keep breathing.

*Stay here…stay here…*

“The oldest scars that we saw look at least a year old already,” the doctor continues. “Most of them were on her thighs, and the ones on her left arm were relatively shallow. There weren’t any others that we can see on her right arm, probably because she’s right-handed. If this was the first one on that arm, then it’s possible that she may not have cut with her left hand before, and this was just an accident. But it seems more likely that she was trying to do exactly what it looks like.”

May closes her eyes. She knows which possibility it was.

“Please just let me...”

“Has she shown signs of depression before?” the doctor asks, and May opens her eyes.

“I don’t know…” she answers slowly, glancing back towards the sleeping girl. “I obviously haven’t been around as often as I should have been…”
“Well, at least you were there when she needed you tonight. This girl can recover, but she’s going to need more than just medical care—you need to be prepared to take responsibility for getting her mental healthcare as well.”

May nods, still staring at Skye. “You’ll have to make sure that the foster system knows that this girl needs help, though. She changes homes a lot. Her treatment would need to be something consistent.”

“Maybe that’s not the only thing that should be.”

May looks back at the doctor, who is watching her carefully. “There will probably be an investigation,” he says quietly, obviously attempting to make a judgment from her reaction, “you do realize that, don’t you?”

May nods mechanically. “Any parent who lets this happen deserves that much.”

A few silent seconds pass before May looks over at Skye again.

“Can I see her for a few minutes?”

The doctor nods, pointing her to a hand-sanitizer dispenser on the wall. “The orderly who’s monitoring her will wait just outside the curtain. We’ll give you a moment, but we need to keep eyes on the girl at all times. Hospital policy.”

May nods and turns away, cleaning her hands and slipping through the curtain before she can change her mind.

The orderly stands and steps out into the hall as she approaches the bed, and May finally studies the girl’s appearance apart from her injury. This incarnation of Skye, still ten years away from the girl May saw this morning, has the thin, stretched-out look of a teenager who has grown too fast for the rest of her body to keep up. Her hair has grown out again and is streaked with unmaintained red highlights, hanging around her shoulders in dirty tangles. Her right forearm is bound in gauze and laid carefully on the bed beside her, a pulse monitor clipped to a finger on the same hand. May steps around to the other side of the bed and turns Skye’s left arm over carefully, and sure enough, there they are—shallow, organized slashes across her skin, some faded, some fresh, faint presses of razorblades leaving furrowed wounds in their wake.

They aren’t marks of someone who wanted to die. They’re marks of someone trying to convince herself to live.

“God, Skye, what have you done…” May lets the words come out in a sigh.

She glances back at Skye’s face and is startled to see the girl’s eyes open, her dark eyes still muddled but trained carefully on May.

“You’re still here?” the girl rasps out, her mouth obviously dry.

May picks up the cup of water on the table beside the bed and offers Skye the straw. “I told them I was your guardian.”

The girl turns her head away from the water, rolling her eyes. “Fuck you,” she whispers.

The words are more surprising than insulting.

“’Fuck you’?” May repeats, setting the water back on the table. “Jesus Christ, Skye. I just pulled you out of a puddle of blood because you opened up your own wrist. Why the hell would you do that?”
Skye closes her eyes, her jaw tightening. “You wouldn’t know, would you? Where the fuck have you been for the last two years?”

**Two years?**

May thinks of the List she’s still failed to memorize, tries to picture in her mind the date after the last date she had marked off, and a cold certainty sweeps over her.

*You didn’t know the date to tell her last time…*

“You thought I abandoned you,” she whispers, closing her eyes and covering her face with one hand. “Oh, God, Skye…”

When May looks up again, Skye is still staring away from her, her jaw working defiantly as tears slide down her cheeks.

“It would make sense…” the girl says quietly. “I mean, everyone else has…”

“Haven’t I told you that we knew each other in the future?” May asks, resting her hands on the bar along the side of the bed. “Haven’t I told you that we would know each other in my present someday? How could you think—“

“Shut up!” Skye suddenly scrapes out, grinding her eyes shut even as she brings her hands up to cover her face. The girl takes a few shuddering breaths behind this shield before lowering her hands, her eyes fixed on the bandage around her wrist.

“Goddammit, this is so unfair!” she shudders, letting her arms fall back against the mattress, wincing in pain at the impact and sending more tears slipping down her cheeks. “You can come and go whenever you want to, you can show up and tell me about this wonderful future that I just have to be patient and look forward to, and then you get to drop back into better times the very next second, but I don’t get that! You leave, and I stay and keep getting passed around like the junk that no one wants but no one’s allowed to throw away. But that’s just the way it has to happen, isn’t it? That’s what you’re always saying—*this is what happens.* I don’t get any say in this—I don’t get to *choose* anything! I can’t even choose to end my own fucking life!”

May waits, unmoving, absorbing the anger and doing everything she can to memorize the words crashing against her.

*I had no idea…I had no idea…*

She closes her eyes and pulls in a fortifying breath.

*Stop. This isn’t about you right now.*

*Do whatever you can.*

She waits in silence a moment longer to make sure that Skye doesn’t have more to say, then nudges the orderly’s rolling stool from the corner of the room to the side of the bed near the girl’s elbow. Skye has turned away from her again, and May sits down and takes another deep breath before speaking quietly in the direction of the girl’s heart.

“That’s one way of looking at it—saying that you don’t have the freedom to choose what will happen in your life. It’s how I felt when I was your age—furious knowing that my future was already what it was, even if my future self wouldn’t tell me specifics, and there was nothing I could do to change it—the good or the bad. But there’s another way of thinking of it, a way that I didn’t
see until I was thinking about what I was going to do for a living someday. I had already seen my adult self so many times by then that I was just used to the fact that I was an adult somewhere in the future. And then, one day, it hit me—that knowledge was such a lucky thing for a person to have. The knowledge that no matter what missions you were sent on, no matter what dangerous things you had to do, you would certainly come out alive and intact, because you’d already seen a future where you were alive in your middle age. And I was possibly the only person in the world to have that reassurance. So…how could I not take a job where my life was endangered often? Braver people do it every day without knowing the things I know. And every time I see myself, older, I get this extension, like I’m learning about the time I have left.”

She glances up to see Skye’s face turned slightly back towards her, though her gaze is still trained up at the ceiling. Her eyes are clearer now, and May’s not sure if the pain she sees in them is mental or physical. She fights the urge to grip Skye’s hand, certain that it will hurt, so she settles for laying her own hand carefully over it. Her skin is still cold.

“You’re right, Skye,” she continues softly, “there’s nothing fair about this. You don’t deserve this awful revolving door of families who don’t love you well enough; you don’t deserve me coming in and throwing your life into confusion again and again. But, Skye, I promise you—you are going to make it. No matter what happens to you, no matter how bad things feel or things get, you do make it through these years because you are strong enough to survive them.”

May stares down at their joined hands, spilling out truth even as her chest grows tight.

“You are going to be that young woman that I meet someday, who came out on the other side of all of this mess with more goodness in her heart than you would believe. You’re going to be strong, healthy, beautiful, smart, and no one who looks at you, including me, will have any idea how much you’ve gone through to just make it this far. But you will make it there, Skye,” May ends, looking up to find the girl finally staring at her. May gently squeezes her hand. “You will make it,” she repeats. “You already did.”

Skye continues to stare at her in silence, looking overwhelmed but also perplexed. May holds her gaze, not knowing what else to say, but when the girl’s pale lips finally part, it’s not for the words she was expecting.

“May,” she whispers, her brow crinkling, “why do you keep calling me ‘Skye’?”

May feels her hands start to tingle, but it’s not enough to distract her from the panicked swoop in her stomach.

That hasn’t happened yet…you just gave away something she didn’t know about yet…

But more importantly—

No one will come and find her if she’s registered in the wrong name.

“Stay here,” she says unnecessarily, jumping to her feet and throwing back the curtain, grabbing at the orderly waiting on the other side.

“I need you to go to Admitting and make sure that the hospital contacts local DHS and calls in the caseworker for Mary Sue Poots. The name I put on this patient’s admission forms is wrong.”

The orderly looks startled as he stammers out a reply, “I’m not supposed to leave this patient’s bedside without a nurse or doctor present…”

“Then go get a nurse to deliver that message,” she snaps, pushing him down the hall. “I can’t stay
here much longer.”

She spins, not caring if he immediately obeys or not, and throws the curtain back around the bed before she crosses quickly back to the bedside. Skye doesn’t look away as May leans over the bed’s rails and brings their faces very close together, swallowing as she reaches up and slowly brushes back Skye’s hair and holds her gaze.

“I know I messed up,” she whispers, letting her fingertips rest lightly on Skye’s cheek, “and I still don’t even know now which date to tell you to expect me next. But those days are coming, Skye. Whatever happens between now and then, I promise you’re going to make it through them. I’ve seen the list of more days with you written down in your own hand, and I’ve seen you as an adult, alive and thriving. Where I’m about to go back to, I’m the one learning from you. And I’m going to do better, Skye. There, and here, I promise that I’m going to do better for you.”

Skye doesn’t flinch away as May leans in and presses a kiss to her forehead. Her hand remains on the girl’s cheek as she pulls away and meets her shining eyes one last time.

“Take whatever help is offered. Ask whatever help you need. Do whatever you need to do in order to stop hurting yourself—you deserve to be on your own side.”

Skye nods against her hand, and May attempts to smile even as her head swims.

“I’ll see you soon,” she promises, focusing on the brown eyes in front of her even as they disappear.

She lands on her knees on the cockpit floor, snatching up her clothes and yanking them on just as someone knocks sharply on the door.

“Skye?” May’s voice rings into her ear from the phone. And Skye hates—hates—that all the woman has to do is say her name to make her heart race and all her confidence disappear. Something seems different about May’s tone, but maybe she’s hearing wrong through the whipping wind. “What have you found?”

The car’s GPS takes her to a desert lot with dirt-road access and rusted fencing that the car easily punches through. As she climbs out of the car among the weird-as-all-fuck mannequins and dollhouse small-town scene, only stretching silence greets her.

At first.

November 18, 2013: Skye is 24, May is 44

She has a leather jacket, a black Lamborghini that purrs like a kitten, and just a little more of an idea why May likes her plane so damn much. She got to use a takedown on one of Rathman’s rent-a-cops, got to pretend to be badass Agent Melinda May for a few hours. And best of all, she has a lead on where Centipede may be keeping her leader.

Hold on, Coulson, we’re coming.

Simmons answers the emergency phone on the second ring, clearly in the presence of other agents and barely getting out two stumbling, embarrassing attempts at fake small talk before it seems like someone pulls the phone out of her hand.

“Skye?” May’s voice rings into her ear from the phone. And Skye hates—that all the woman has to do is say her name to make her heart race and all her confidence disappear. Something seems different about May’s tone, but maybe she’s hearing wrong through the whipping wind. “What have you found?”

The car’s GPS takes her to a desert lot with dirt-road access and rusted fencing that the car easily punches through. As she climbs out of the car among the weird-as-all-fuck mannequins and dollhouse small-town scene, only stretching silence greets her.
“You shouldn’t be here!”

The Centipede soldier chases her as she sprints back towards the car—Why the hell didn’t I swipe a gun before I left?—but an engine roars in her right ear as she breaks out of the buildings, and the confirming thud of something soft hitting something hard tells her that, friend or foe, the impact did the trick.

She’s barely turned around before Jemma is slamming into her and wrapping her in a crushing hug while Fitz and Ward clamber out of the car and hover anxiously around them. Skye’s eyes find May as the woman slams the driver’s door, eyes scanning the area around them but seeming to snag on Skye. She only lifts her chin slightly, a silent acknowledgment, and Skye nods back as she releases Simmons and they all turn towards the false town.

Ward takes on the last Centipede soldier while the rest of them fan out to search the buildings, and Skye looks back only once to see May easily destroy two more guards that race out to stop them.

It’s Coulson’s terrified scream that eventually brings them to the right place.

Skye’s heart is in her throat as she sprints through the dust and into the darkness. A girl in a flower dress doesn’t look at all afraid as she turns towards Skye as she runs into the room with May on her heels.

“It’s for his own good,” the woman starts to say, but Skye’s punch is strong and certain enough to take her down before she can attempt to convince her of anything else.

Coulson is strapped to some kind of head-scanner, whimpering and literally begging for death. Skye’s hands hover uselessly over the machine’s controls, but it’s May who pulls the plug from the wall, as always, finding the simplest solution to the problem.

“Please let me die! Please let me die!” Coulson is still whispering as Skye wraps her hands around his.

*God, what have they done to you…*

“Coulson!” she chokes out, leaning in close and squeezing his hands with all the strength she has, trying to bring him back to the reality around him. “Come back come back come back!”

She knows that she has no right to demand anything from him.

But he, of all people, deserves to live.

May hovers on the man’s other side, looking the most distraught that Skye has ever seen her. When Coulson’s eyes finally crack and he exhales Skye’s name, though, everything in the other woman seems to dissolve. Skye hangs on to Coulson as May turns away from them both, sighing in relief, and pulls her radio from her belt.

“SHIELD HQ, this is SHIELD RG24,” she says into the radio in a shaking voice, and Skye sees her raise a hand and smear it over her face, as if wiping away tears, “We have Agent Coulson in hand and need emergency medical and prisoner transport.”

Simmons stabilizes Coulson before Hand arrives with her team, and by the time they all make it back to the plane and he has showered and changed into a fresh suit (*Seriously, does that man ever take a day off?*), were it not for the injuries on his face and the haunted look in his eyes, he might almost look like himself. Skye stands stock-still in the lab watching as Raina is loaded into a car in handcuffs and Hand and Coulson exchange quiet words in the cargo bay.
“Nice jacket,” a voice says at her shoulder, and Skye looks cautiously over at May even as the woman watches their leaders, a knowing smile hovering in her expression. Skye stares at her and can’t help but smile too, because this is the way it always goes.

They keep leaving each other, but they keep coming back together.

As certain as orbits.

May:

She’s already shed her dusty clothes and shoes and washed the blood off her hands, and she still needs a shower and a full night of sleep and a long talk with Phil, probably in that order.

But first, she needs to see Skye.

She needs to understand.

The girl’s door is halfway open as she approaches it, and May stops just out of sight where she can see the girl redressed in leggings and a dark t-shirt as she sits on her bed in the half-dark and works a comb through her freshly-washed hair.

May hesitates just outside of the light, the ever-present fear wedging its foot in front of her, but she takes a deep breath and overrides it.

This will only get harder the longer you put it off.

Today, of all days, she deserves for you to try.

Skye’s head snaps up as May knocks softly on the doorjamb. She sees the girl’s face flash from happiness to caution in a single second, only confirming what she’s already decided.

We can do better than this.

“Hey,” Skye says slowly, visibly scanning May’s body language for clues to her purpose.

“Mind if I come in?” May asks before she can change her mind, planting one foot halfway into the room.

Skye looks surprised but nods immediately, shifting slightly over on her bed as May steps into the tiny room—not much larger than the ER cubicle she saw this morning—and slides the bunk’s door shut behind her.

“You’ve never knocked before,” Skye says softly as May turns towards her, choosing to remain standing with her arms folded loosely across her chest. “Usually, you just materialized in my room.”

May allows a small smile as she meets the girl’s eyes before dropping it in favor of solemnity.

“I wanted to tell you that you did great today,” she says, staring through the small space between them.

She knows she could be more specific, but she needs to save her words.

Skye’s lips turn into a cautious smile. “Thank you,” she whispers, and May hears the depth that her affirmation has reached.
“You know why I got you off the plane,” May adds, just to be sure.

Skye drops her eyes, nodding once. “I know now.”

“And, the other day, the things I said…” May continues, remembering the arrows she flung at the girl’s personal investment in SHIELD, “I’m sorry if I was harsher than I needed to be.”

Skye keeps her eyes down, wrapping her arms loosely around herself. “I’m getting used to it.”

May stares at her and feels a fresh wave of guilt crash over her.

You shouldn’t have to get used to any more pain.

She glances at the faint tan-line on the girl’s wrist where a silver cuff used to be. “Heard you’ve been exonerated,” she says, lightening her tone a little.

Skye looks up, seeming relieved by the change of topic. “Yep,” she says, lifting her right hand and waving it soundlessly. “Coulson finally cut the cord.”

Without thinking twice, May reaches across the short space between them and catches the girl’s wrist gently with one finger, tugging Skye’s arm down perpendicular to her body. And there it is, stretched white across her skin, a thickened scar that had been covered by a restrictor cuff, athletic tape, long sleeves, or strategically-placed bracelets until now.

It’s a battle scar. Proof of what she’s been through—proof of what she’s survived.

As May stares at the white line on her wrist, feeling like her stomach is dissolving away inside her, Skye seems to realize what she’s seeing and tugs her arm away. May doesn’t try to hold on, letting the girl withdraw and wrap the arm around herself again, hiding her hand beneath her other elbow.

“It was a long time ago,” the girl says quietly, looking away.

May takes a deep breath. “Not for me it wasn’t.”

Skye’s eyes fly to May’s again, their gazes colliding with the force of a rock meeting a window.

“This morning,” May answers the inevitable question, holding the girl’s startled gaze. “I was in the cockpit, and then I was on your bedroom floor. I went with you to the hospital.”

Skye continues to stare at her for a long moment, and May sees the girl’s arm muscles go taut, as if she’s holding onto herself for support. She’s ten years older than the girl May left in a hospital bed this morning, but in this moment, she looks nearly the same—exhausted. Overwhelmed. Too full of too many things, and too tired of holding on to them on her own.

“That was the first time that you saved my life, you know,” Skye finally says, her eyes falling away from May’s. “I didn’t know how many times you were going to do it.”

“And I didn’t realize how many times I was going to hear those words today.”

She knows they’re remembering the same thing.

“Please just let me die…”

May doesn’t remember deciding to move, but her feet take her across the tiny patch of carpet between her and the bed, and she sits carefully down beside the girl, space between them but still near enough to touch.
She doesn’t think she’ll need to prompt Skye into talking, and she’s right.

“I hated you, at that time, May,” Skye says slowly, staring down the carpet, her arms still folded tightly around herself. “I kept telling myself that, anyway. I hated that you only came around for a few hours at the most, that it was so easy for you to leave, that you couldn’t take me with you. I hated the power you had in my life, telling me about this so-called future where we knew each other, making me feel like I couldn’t actually decide anything because everything was already set. And I hated you for abandoning me, just like everyone else. And on top of that, I was angry at my parents for giving me up, at the foster families that never wanted me to stay…but all of them were targets I couldn’t get my hands on. So I just directed that hate at the one thing in easy reach…the one thing that all those things had in common.”

May thinks of scars that might be lurking elsewhere on Skye’s skin, thinks of a heart rent to ribbons by year after year of rejection and neglect, and feels her own heart aching so deeply that the space inside it must be echoing.

“I’m trying to hate you now, May,” Skye goes on, finally turning to look her in the eye again, her voice slightly hoarse with reined-in emotion, “because I know it would make this easier, but I can’t. I can keep my mouth shut and I can try to stay away, but I can’t stop hurting when you push me back. I can’t stop wanting you to care about me the way I care about you. And I hate that you still have this power over me, that you say I’m your fixed point that you’ll always come back to but that some days it feels like I couldn’t get away from all this even if I wanted to, that you’re the one holding on to me and always pulling me back in…I hate that you can push me away, or leave me, or make me leave but it doesn’t make a bit difference because I still want you to love me all the same…but after all that, I can’t make myself hate you, May. Even if that would make all this easier.”

There’s so much in there that May needs to think about when her mind is clearer, but she knows what she needs to do right now. Without breaking eye contact, she reaches over and lays her hand face-up on Skye’s thigh, fingers parted and waiting for one thing. Skye glances down, and May sees her lips purse as though fighting against a current, but it’s only two more seconds before she places her hand in May’s. It’s warm—wonderfully warm—thrumming with strength, blazing with life.

Skye stares down at their joined hands, blinking two solitary tears down her cheeks. “You were right,” she rasps out. “I made it.”

Without thinking, May reaches over with her free hand and brushes the tears gently off the girl’s cheek. “I’m glad you did.”

Skye looks up at her and manages a real smile. “Me too.”

They sit in silence for a long minute, their hands joined and May counting the heartbeats she feels in her fingers.

There’s no way to know that this is going to lead to anything good, anything worth all the pain that seems to inevitably accompany them through every decade.

*She lived because you were there to save her.*

*But if you hadn’t been part of her life, though, she might not have needed saving at all.*

*You don’t need to rush this.*

May squeezes the girl’s hand briefly, then gently extracts her hand as she stands, taking one unhurried step towards the door. “I should…”
“May.”

Skye’s voice is stronger than she’s heard it since she walked in here. May turns and sees the girl half-daring, half-pleading in the dim light.

“I don’t need you to be…whatever it is you think you have to be,” Skye says slowly, her eyes never leaving May’s. “Maybe at this point, I don’t even know what that is anymore. But I’m holding onto this hope, this promise you’ve given me in my past, that there’s going to come a day when you don’t leave me anymore. Will you tell me—am I wrong to keep believing in that?”

She bites her lip, clearly afraid that she has just asked too much, has asked for it in the wrong way, has just done more harm than good…

But May knows. She would never tell someone in the past anything if she didn’t know that it was true. For all the leaving she’s apparently done in this girl’s life, she owed her that promise.

“No. I don’t think you are.”

May holds her gaze and offers all she can.

“I can’t promise to stay forever. You know how little I have control over. But I can promise you that won’t leave until I have to,” she says with all the sincerity she can summon. “And I’ll stick to that in any way that I can.”

It scares her how much relief those words bring to Skye’s eyes, but the girl only nods gratefully, pursing her lips as if against a deluge.

“Thank you.”

*Give her one more thing.*

Turning the lock in the door, May steps across the floor and sits down again, leaning against the cabin wall behind the bed and drawing her legs up onto the mattress. She lifts one arm, and Skye needs no prompting to fit herself under it, crowding gratefully against May, fitting beneath her chin and throwing an arm across her waist, squeezing her in an embrace that seems to come from years of stored-up emotion and days of tramped-down stress. May wraps her arm around the girl’s shoulders and squeezes back, feeling the warmth of her skin through her shirt. Skye’s cheek rests on her sternum above the collar of her V-neck, and May feels the slightest dampness even as Skye reaches up to wipe the tears off her other cheek.

“I’m sorry, Skye,” she whispers, her fingers combing gently through the girl’s damp hair, “I didn’t know…”

*I didn't know how much you've come through.*

*I didn’t know I mattered this much.*

Skye only squeezes her tighter, and May feels a contained shudder echo through her body. She holds on and makes her choice.

If staying is what this girl needs, then that’s something that, right now, she can give.

“We both need some sleep,” she says softly, though not attempting to move from beneath Skye. “Go ahead and lie down. I’ll try not to wake you if I have to go.”
Skye nods minutely beneath her chin. “You can lie down, too, if you want,” the girl offers cautiously.

“One step at a time,” May murmurs, the gentlest deferral she can come up with. She thinks she can feel Skye’s cheek pull into a smile against her skin. “Okay.”

Skye shifts down until she’s curled on her side on the mattress next to her, her cheek resting on May’s thigh, an arm still flung across her legs. The young woman burrows comfortably into the bedding and relaxes against her, pliant and peaceful, warm and heavy, a compression blanket on May’s exhausted body.

May can already feel herself nodding off, but before she gives in to the weariness, she flips the edge of the duvet beneath them up over Skye’s bare feet and reaches for the nearest item of clothing on the bed to drape around the girl’s shoulders and arms. She tips her head back against the cabin wall and closes her eyes, one hand remaining on Skye’s shoulder, the other still combing gently through her hair.

Skye nestles against her beneath the black leather jacket, already sound asleep.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: cutting/self-harm, suicide attempt, discussion of suicidal thoughts

I've done a lot of reading on the American foster system (not just for this fic) and have tried to fit this story inside the facts as well as I can. Foster kids suffer from PTSD at higher rates than soldiers, they are more likely to suffer from depression and develop destructive behaviors, and they end up homeless within their first year of aging-out at alarming rates. Skye is a lifetime foster kid, and that would leave a much deeper mark than the show has ever let us see. Although there is no evidence in the show that she was ever suicidal, her arc in s4 leads me to believe the past I've written here is not too ooc, and as you can see, some of her canon lines hint at years of hurt that she didn't always deal well with.

I do not have personal experience with self-harm and suicidal thoughts/actions, but I tried to research this topic (and its recovery process) as well as I could. That said, if there is anything in here or later chapters that seems inaccurate and or misleading, please let me know in the comments. I realize this is a sensitive topic and want to write it appropriately.
February 1, 1995—Skye is 5, May is 45

It’s almost the end of the school day, and Mary is still trying to remember why today's date sounds important.

Her pre-K teacher had shown her class the date on the board that afternoon, helped them practice spelling the new month out letter by letter, and announced that because there was a special holiday tomorrow, they would be learning about groundhogs and shadows today. For the rest of the half-day class, Mary had stared at the date, trying to figure out why the combination of words had sounded so familiar, why this day was ringing a bell that she couldn’t find in her brain.

She still hasn’t come up with any decent answer by the time she zips up her secondhand backpack, pulls on her coat and hat, and lines up at the classroom door with the rest of the flock of four and five-year-olds. As the bell rings, she follows the spill of children into the pre-K/kindergarten pod, then joins the flow out into the big hallway as classrooms empty and students from all grades mingle and crisscross on their way out the doors.

It’s too cold to wait for the busses outside today, so Mary follows her line into the cafeteria, where students are corralled until their designated buses are at the curb and ready to be filled. Mary joins her bus's line and sits down by herself, but it's not long before the second-graders arrive and one student breaks off of a group of boys to thump down beside her.

"Where's your scarf, Tiny?" her foster brother, Damien, asks as she smiles up at him.

"Oh, right..." she says, opening her bag again to pull out the thick, blue and white knitted garment, her latest gift from a soft-hearted community group.

Some people from the local church made these for you and other kids like you, her caseworker had said a few months ago when she had knelt to wrap the scarf around Mary’s neck. It gets pretty cold in Nebraska in the winter, and they wanted to make sure that you were prepared for all the chilly days.

Mary wraps the garment around her neck and, her brother tucks it into the collar of her coat.

"Heard it got colder since recess,” he says, standing and pulling her to her feet as the hall monitor signals their bus's students to stand and head out to the bus loop

The winter air feels like a slap in the face as the students dash from the school's door to the bus's, and Mary throws herself into the first empty seat she sees, putting her bag on the seat between herself and Damien. They both see his sister, Danielle, climb on with her friends, but she ignores them both and
heads to the back, the last students to board before the door squeaks closed and the bus rumbles out of the bus loop.

Her current elementary school is surrounded, as most things in this town seem to be, by stretches of farmland. Seemingly endless wintering cornfields roll out in all directions as her bus rolls down the arrow-straight two-lane road, heading into “the city”, where her current family lives. As Damien pulls out a book and begins to read, Mary stares at the window and counts the fenceposts demarcating the stretches of snow-dusted land that they pass, trying to figure out how many lie between each stoplight, whether it’s more or less than the number of fence posts that hem in the pasture plots on the other side of town.

As small shops and new neighborhoods replace the bare fields flanking the road, Mary breathes on the window so that she can write in the fog her breath creates on the cold glass.

She first spells her name, M-A-R-Y, easy with only four letters and lots of straight lines, then challenges herself to squeeze in J-A-N-U-A-R-Y below it. They’ve been practicing this word for weeks now, and she can finally spell it without help.

But it’s not January anymore, she reminds herself, smearing out the word and breathing over the glass again, covering it with a fresh coat of fog. It’s February first today. F-E-B…

But she can’t remember the rest, and as she tries to “sound it out” in her head, she is distracted again by how familiar the phrase sounds.

February first…February first…Why was that day important? she asks herself again as the bus turns onto a narrow street where tired houses crowd close to the sidewalk.

"Damien, is it your birthday today?" she asks, turning to face the boy beside her.

Her brother looks confused. "No, not for four more months. Why?"

"Is it Danielle's birthday? Or Theresa's? Or anyone else's that you know?" Mary can't come up with any other reason why might remember a date.

But Damien shakes his head. "Danielle's is in April. I don't know Theresa's...or any of the other kids'. When's yours?"

"November eleventh," she answers, looking back at the window and the letters on the glass. She is still staring at the half-word on the window as the bus hisses to a stop.

“Come on, Tiny,” Damien says, tugging once at her sleeve as he stands, and Mary stands quickly and grabs her small backpack, shuffling to the door behind him.

The cold wind is as harsh against her cheeks as before when she steps out onto the mottled sidewalk, piled with dirty snow on both sides and still crusty with unsalted black ice.

“Damien, tell Theresa that I went to Tina's house,” Danielle orders as the bus rolls away, turning without waiting for a response and heading down the street towards her middle school friend's home. "I'll be home by dinner."

Damien pulls his hood up and steers Mary wordlessly up the street to the small, white one-story house with the wilting snowman out front, a relic from a January blizzard that had dropped enough snow that Mary had not been able to walk across the yard until her siblings had broken a trail across the two-foot drifts. Now, the old sculpture has wilted down to a vague suggestion of a person, more like a pyramid at this point, still standing guard in their small front yard.
They hustle side-by-side up the sidewalk and through the unlocked front door, slamming it behind them against a gust of wind as they stumble into the small entryway.

“What did I tell you all about slamming doors?” a voice calls from the kitchen as Mary pulls off her hat and scarf and fumbles with her coat’s zipper with cold fingers.

“Sorry, Theresa!” Damien calls with a roll of his eyes, though his tone is respectful. “Here,” he mutters, bending and unzipping Mary’s coat for her. “Don’t forget to hang it up when you get to your room.”

Mary remembers on her own to take off her shoes before stepping onto the carpet, to carry her backpack and coat and hat straight to the girls’ bedroom and hang them on her designated peg near the door, then go to the bathroom and wash her hands, wincing under the warm water, before returning to the kitchen.

“Hey, Mary, how was school today?” her foster mom asks her as she walks in. Theresa is seated at the table across from a high chair, bottle-feeding the baby in her arms while making sure the toddler in the high chair doesn’t throw his food on the floor.

“Okay,” Mary says, climbing up onto her chair on Theresa’s other side. The woman immediately slides an open package of crackers in front of her, and Mary helps herself to one. “Mrs. Holloway said there’s some kind of holiday tomorrow, so we learned about shadows and groundhogs.”

Theresa scoffs, but she’s smiling as she sets the baby’s bottle on the table and brings the baby up to her shoulder to burp her. “I don’t care what that groundhog says tomorrow, he can’t control Canadian cold fronts. This has to be the coldest winter we’ve had in years…”

“What do you mean?” Mary asks around her cracker, feeling the crumbs dropping onto the cracked logo on the front of her hoodie.

“Don’t worry, I’m sure you’ll learn all about it tomorrow,” Theresa says, just before the baby lets out a burp that sends a stream of formula dripping down the back of the woman’s shirt.

“Attagirl,” her mom sighs, and Mary makes a face and leans away. The woman stands, removing all but one of the crackers from the two-year-old’s tray. “You can throw that one while I’m gone, Tanner, but save the rest until I get back. Mary, can you get your own juice? Or just wait a minute. I’ll be right back.”

The little boy waits all of three seconds after Theresa leaves the room to throw his cracker to the floor, then looks expectantly over at Mary, as though she’s going to give him another one.

“You’re not supposed to do that,” she reminds him, sliding off her chair and going to the refrigerator. She’s digging in the bottom drawer where the juice boxes are kept when she hears a strange sound, and when she closes the fridge’s door, Mary jumps in surprise at the sight of a person standing on the other side.

A person not wearing clothes.

“Oh, no,” she hears the woman gasp, lunging towards the counter and dropping out of sight behind it.

Mary drops her juice box and hurries around the counter, where she sees the person—a woman—snatching a towel from the pile of folded laundry on the counter to quickly pull it around herself. She looks up as Mary steps into view, and her eyes get wide.
“Oh my god!” the woman breathes, smiling at Mary, who is also short enough to not be seen behind the counter. “You’re so little!”

And suddenly, the memory is there—a back porch and a book and a flashlight and someone who disappeared right before her eyes…

“You!” she exclaims, pointing at the woman. “You’re that lady…”

But the woman is suddenly putting her warning finger to her lips, leaning close to Mary even as she stays hidden behind the countertop.

“Where’s your bedroom?” she asks urgently. “I can’t let your mom see me.”

Dubious, Mary points towards the kitchen door, but the woman shakes her head. “Someone’s watching TV through there. Come on, Mary, follow me.” And the woman slinks carefully across the ground towards the laundry room door, which she slips through without looking back, and Mary follows, wide-eyed, behind her.

When Mary steps through the laundry-room door and closes it, the lady is already riffling through the pile of dirty clothes, extracting a long-sleeved t-shirt and a pair of pajama pants, both of which belong to Theresa.

“Where are your clothes?” Mary asks as the woman starts to pull the shirt on.

“Shh,” the woman responds gently, her eyes darting towards the door as her head emerges from the neck hole. “We have to whisper or your mom will come in here and ask who you’re talking to.”

Mary stares at the woman, remembering how the woman had been wearing borrowed clothes the last time she saw her, too.

February first…this is why you were supposed to remember it.

“You’re the woman I met last summer,” she says quietly, watching as the woman pulls on the pants before dropping the towel back into the laundry pile. “I don’t remember your name. But I remember you.”

The woman finally faces her fully, smiling big as she lowers herself to her knees so that they’re eye-level again.

“And I know you, Mary,” the woman says with a smile. “You can call me May.”

Mary nods slowly. “Okay, May, well, how did you lose your clothes?”

May cocks her head. “I’m a time traveler, remember?”

Mary shakes her head slowly, confused. Time traveler?

The woman seems surprised. “No? I didn’t tell you that? Okay, well, I haven’t been to that visit yet, so I’m not sure what I told you last time, but I’m a time traveler, and that’s how I got here today. Just a minute ago, I was in my own bedroom in…another place…and then suddenly, I was here in your kitchen. I didn’t come in a car, or on a plane, or in a spaceship…I just appeared here. I can’t control it, but it is kind of amazing sometimes.”

Mary stares at the woman, trying to make sense of what she’s hearing. The woman’s expression looks sincere, but none of this makes any sense…
“This is totally over your head right now isn’t it?” the woman says with another smile, as if reading her mind. “Well, remember the last time I saw you? I told you that I would be coming today, didn’t I? I knew that because I’m always coming from the future, where you told me that you saw me on February 1, 1995, when you were living in Nebraska. Isn’t that where we are now?”

Mary nods slowly. “But why did you come today?” she asks.

The woman shrugs. “I don’t know. I don’t get to pick the days, I just know when they’re going to happen. Did I tell you last time that you and I will be friends someday when you’re a grown-up?”

Mary nods slowly, a hazy memory slowly getting clearer. “I think…I thought that I dreamed that…all of it…”

The woman smiles again, her eyes tender. “Nope. You really saw me last summer. You were four then. But how old are you now? Five?”

“Yeah, five,” Mary confirms automatically, lifting a hand with all her fingers splayed. “I go to pre-K now,” she adds proudly.

“Wow! Well guess what, you’re going to see more of me, Mary, and I want to give you a list of some of those days. Can you go find me a piece of paper and a pen? And if your mom sees you come back in here, she might follow you, so you’ll have to be very sneaky, okay?” May says conspiratorially.

Mary nods gravely, and the woman moves towards the door, turning the knob silently and staying behind the door as she opens it just wide enough for Mary to dart through.

“What were you doing in there?” Theresa asks, spotting Mary as soon as she walks out into the kitchen again. She’s sweeping the floor around the high chair while the baby watches from a hammock chair on the table.

“Uh…looking for some paper,” Mary answers quickly putting distance between herself and the laundry room door.

“You know it’s in the bottom drawer by the computer,” the woman says, returning to her sweeping.

“Thanks!” Mary says hurriedly, dashing through the kitchen and fishing out a piece of notebook paper before plucking a pen from the cup on the desk. She goes out as though going towards her bedroom, then doubles back and creeps around the dining table, waiting until Theresa tucks the broom beside the fridge and finally extracts the toddler from his high chair. Tanner immediately begins pushing the dining chairs across the tiles, his favorite sound, and the baby on the table begins to fuss. Theresa lifts the small thing into her arms, and Mary sees her pick up the shirt she was wearing earlier, the one that was spit up on, and start to move towards the laundry room.

“Wait!” Mary cries automatically, lunging at the young woman. “I’ll do it!” She grabs the shirt from Theresa’s hands and cracks the door open herself, throwing the shirt on the pile of laundry and then closing the door again quickly, turning and pressing her back protectively against it.

Theresa is eyeing her carefully. “Mary, are you doing something you’re not supposed to be doing in there?” She has the knowing look of a parent who has seen every trick in the book.

Mary shakes her head, doing her best to look innocent, but Theresa reaches over her head anyway, turning the knob and pushing the door open. Mary bites her lip and turns over her shoulder, unsure of how her mom will respond to a stranger in her laundry room wearing her clothes…
But Theresa seems satisfied as she looks in and sees only the week’s dirty clothes piled on the floor.

“I don’t want you playing in here, Mary,” the woman says, bouncing the baby on her shoulder as she shuts the door. “We’ve got other rooms in the house for that.”

Fortunately, her mother is distracted in that moment by a loud crash—and they both look in time to see Tanner burst into tears, having just managed to tip a chair over and apparently overwhelmed by the sound it made.

“Oh, buddy, did you scare yourself?” her mother says, moving back towards the dining table, and Mary takes the moment to dart back into the laundry room, the pen and paper still clutched in her hands.

May is behind the door as she shuts it again.

“How many children are in this house?” she asks in an amazed voice, taking the pen and paper and dropping to her knees on the linoleum floor again, immediately beginning to write.

May stays close to the door as she answers. “Right now, Damien and me and Tanner and the baby—I forgot her name—so four. But Danielle’s at her friend’s house, and Marcus and Angel are still at track practice, and Hailey has a job at the daycare after school.”

“Eight kids in one house?” May exhales, still writing. “Your foster mom’s a saint.”

Mary shrugs. “I like her. She has lots of rules, but she’s really nice.” She moves closer to May and examines the paper. “What are you writing?”

May turns the paper slightly towards her, and Skye recognizes letters and numbers but can’t read any of it. “It’s a list of dates when I’m going to come and see you again,” the woman tells her. "I know you can’t read it yet, but you’ll be able to soon. On these days, you should plan to be alone somewhere—maybe not in your kitchen—and I’ll appear wherever you are.”

“But what if I have to go to school that day?” Mary asks, picturing the scene.

May pauses in her writing, a smile spreading across her face. “Well, that’s never happened before—I’ve only ever been in your homes or nearby, not in your schools. That sure would be a story, though…” She goes back to the list scribbling more dates.

“Mary?” a voice filters through the door again. “You’d better not be playing in there again.”

Mary pauses in her writing, a smile spreading across her face. “Well, that’s never happened before—I’ve only ever been in your homes or nearby, not in your schools. That sure would be a story, though…” She goes back to the list scribbling more dates.

“Mary?” a voice filters through the door again. “You’d better not be playing in there again.”

May straightens, folding the paper quickly and tucking it into Mary’s hoodie pocket. “Take this with you whenever you move again,” she says seriously, gripping Mary’s elbows gently. “The next visit will be during the summer, and you’ll be in a new place by then. But wherever you go, I’ll meet you there, okay?”

Overwhelmed, Mary can’t even nod.

“Mary?” Theresa’s voice calls again, sounding less patient.

May moves out of the way and nudges Mary towards the door. “Go ahead—I don’t want to get you in trouble. I’m about to disappear anyway. I’m glad I got to see you today!” she finishes with a warm smile.

Suddenly realizing that “summer” means several months of waiting, Mary rushes forward and throws her arms around the woman’s neck. “Ok, see you soon. Will you tell me more about time travel next
time?” she asks over the woman’s shoulder.

“Sure,” the woman agrees, sounding a little surprised as she gently hugs Mary back.

Mary hears footsteps on the other side of the door and pulls away from May. “Mary, get out of there, right now!” Theresa is saying as Mary rushes to the door to try to get out before her mom can come in.

But Theresa has the door open already, and she’s staring pointedly down at Mary. “What did I tell you?” her foster mother says, sounding only the slightest bit impatient. “This is not a playroom. Get out of here and go play somewhere else.”

Surprised, Mary glances back to where May had been, but there’s no one there, and the clothes she was wearing are puddled on the ground.

Did I imagine all this again?

She touches her pocket and feels the piece of paper tucked in it.

No. Not a dream.

You really just met a time-traveler.

“Okay, Theresa,” she says obediently, and walks out, picking up her juice box off the kitchen floor on the way back to her bedroom.

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**September 19, 2014—May is 45, Skye is 24**

She doesn’t reappear exactly where she was when she disappeared; instead, she’s opening her eyes in the corner of the room that she left, still dark with the dead of night. Without waiting for the vertigo to wear off, she staggers to her feet and stumbles towards her bed, barely discernable in the thick dark. She bumps into it and sprawls gracelessly on top of her covers, eliciting a startled sound from the person beneath them.

“May? Jesus…get off me…” her bedmate mumbles, disoriented. A hand finds the top of her head and pushes her away. “This bed’s more than big enough for two…”

But May is reaching over the voice and finding the piece of paper that the two of them keep tucked under the mattress, the same one that has made it through nearly twenty years of travels, barely more intact than its owners.

“I just saw you in Nebraska,” she says, finding the switch on the lamp and flooding the room with light. Beneath her, Skye blinks and puts a hand up against the light, but she is smiling when her eyes finally open again. She squints at May as the woman shifts off her, lying on her stomach beside Skye as she unfolds the paper.

“So you finally met Baby Mary?” Skye asks, rolling over on her side and watching as May grabs a pen from the nightstand and checks a date off on the paper, adding today’s date beside it. “Was I cute?”

May turns her head and grins at the girl, nearly twenty years older than the child she just left. It had been like seeing a photograph or a home movie, but a million times better. “You were adorable.”

Skye smiles sleepily, and May can’t help rocking over and kissing the girl’s lips, feeling the warmth
in her chest start to spread as she reaches up and lays her hand on Skye’s cheek, still unable to believe that this is all real and really hers…

“I think you’d better put that List away and get back under these covers,” Skye says, still sleepily, when May finally lets her lips do anything else.

“You're such a good sport,” May returns with a smile, tossing the pen and paper aside and hitting the lights again before slipping under the covers and wrapping herself around the other woman, chest to chest. "Sorry I woke you up."

“Don't be,” Skye murmurs against her shoulder before pressing her lips to the skin there. As the girl tucks herself beneath May’s chin and exhales against her, May closes her eyes and loses herself all over again in the miracle that is their tangled stories--knotted and unsightly but hopelessly connected, for better or worse, from the past to the present and beyond.

May ducks her head and brushes her lips over Skye's bowed head. "Love you," she whispers against her hair, breathing in everything that has come to smell like home.

Skye is already nearly asleep again, but May thinks she can feel her cheek pull into a smile against her skin. "Love you, too," she murmurs, the words landing gently somewhere over May's heart.

Chapter End Notes

I'm bad at proofing when names are only different by one letter, so if you saw a place where you think I typed May instead of Mary or vice versa, please feel free to tell me in the comments! This story's confusing enough without my typos making it worse.
Pivot

Chapter Notes

Just a little re-set chap to get us moving towards the Next Big Things...
[and just in case you missed it, all of ch19 was a time-jump, including the ending--so here we're picking up where we left Skye and May after the Magical Place events.]

November 19, 2013: Skye is 24, May is 44

She wakes up when May does.

There is a brief moment of confusion when Skye opens her eyes and sees her tiny room from the wrong angle, her head pillowed on something warm at the wrong end of her bed. Beside her, tucked between her body and the cabin wall, is another person, someone startling awake but quickly settling herself as she recognizes her surroundings. Skye blinks again and squints into the daylight bleeding through the window shade.

*She’s still here.*

May is squirming, fumbling for something in her back pocket. It seems like she’s trying to move slowly so as not to wake her, so Skye murmurs an interrogative sound, shifting slightly to let May know that she’s already awake.

“It’s just my phone,” the woman whispers then, finally extracting the thing and cutting off the vibration of an incoming call. May brings the phone close to her face, blocking Skye’s gaze, so Skye examines their position instead.

She’s not sure how it happened, but at some point during the night, May had eventually lain down on her side without removing the leg supporting Skye’s head, resulting in May’s head ending up somewhere near Skye’s stomach, one arm tucked beneath her own head as a pillow, the two of them curled around one another like kittens. Skye’s not sure how long they’ve slept, but she feels like she could still sleep for another week.

It looks like she’ll be finishing her slumber alone, though.

“I’ve gotta get up,” May finally says quietly, her thumb tapping on her phone screen as she sends a message. Skye isn’t sure if this means May has business to take care of or has simply run out of patience, but either way, Skye knows better than to fight it.

May stuffs her phone back in her pocket before levering up on her elbow and dragging a hand over her face, as though attempting to smear away the lingering sleepiness. Before moving further, though, she looks down at Skye. “You okay?” the woman asks gently, her eyes searching her face.

And whatever way May means her question, Skye realizes that the answer is finally *Yes.*

Skye smiles as she nods, then lifts her head slightly so that May can slide her leg out from beneath her and sit up at the foot of the bed. Skye shuffles down beneath her blanket—*oh wait, no, my jacket?*—and turns her head to watch May stand and stretch subtly, scrubbing her hands over her
face again. She doesn’t glance back as she takes a single, stiff step towards the door, so Skye takes her chance.

“May?” she says quietly, not moving from the bed.

The woman looks over her shoulder with a question in her eyes, her hand pausing on the door’s lock.

Behind her ribs, Skye’s heart swells until it almost hurts to breathe.

Go easy on her, she reminds herself.

“Thanks for staying,” she whispers, a smile lingering on her lips.

May’s eyes soften, her lips barely turning up, more of a look of compassion than anything else. She doesn’t say anything, just nods once before unlocking the door, opening it just enough to slip through and sliding it shut behind her.

Skye exhales in the empty room, which suddenly seems much colder. As she pushes aside the jacket and finally crawls to the right end of her bed to squirm under her blankets, her thoughts attempt to get ahead of her.

That was a first. The way she looked at you right then—the way she looked at you last night—something’s changed.

Is this how it begins for her?

But…

No, she reminds herself, her thoughts blurring again as soon as her head hits the pillow and the days of delayed weariness crash on her once more. It doesn’t matter how or when it begins—you know that it will. It will happen the way it happens.

All you have to do is not give up.

May:

Ten minutes—she had replied to Coulson through text message when he had woken her up with a phone call. Ten minutes to wake up and pull herself together. Just long enough for a shower and caffeine.

Her body aches with the stiffness of a long sleep as she shuffles through the cabin, bypassing the kitchen in favor of going towards her own bunk to gather her towel and shower kit before slipping into the empty cabinet of a bathroom on the cabin level.

Standing under the hot spray and finally washing the dirt and days of stress from her skin helps her wake up fully, but as she does, the avalanche of the past few days crashes on her all over again.

She thinks again of the wound on Skye’s wrist, of the empty house and the hospital bed, of the teenager’s anger and despair. She thinks of the words that passed between them in Skye’s room last night and the promises that she hasn’t yet made but now knows are hers to keep.

So many things I didn’t know…

And there are still 25 more visits, she reminds herself as turns off the water and towels off. Who
knows what else you’ll see? Who knows what else you’ll learn...

The cool cabin air makes goosebumps rise on her skin as she moves back to her bunk, deliberately avoiding glancing around in case anyone else is in the common area, and as soon as she’s locked her door, she drops her towel and pulls on clean clothes. As she dresses, she mentally lays her few snapshots on a timeline—the hopeful nine-year-old, the frustrated preteen, the despairing teenager…and now the girl on the plane.

*How can they all be the same person? How can a girl that young have been through that much?*

Somehow, life had come back into the girl she left in an emergency room ten years ago. Somehow, that girl had rallied herself and moved past—or at least moved through—all the darkness in her mind, all the pain in her heart. She had absorbed the hurt, taken on the circumstances, and had twisted every fraying thread in herself together until she had something strong enough to hold onto again. It’s incredible, really.

*And that girl who has held on to the promise of your presence in her future doesn’t deserve the distance you keep marking off between yourself and her.*

She deserves a chance to earn her place in Melinda’s own future.

*But more than that, she deserves what she came here to find.*

Melinda hangs her damp towel on the back of her door and twists her wet hair into a bun, wrapping it in an elastic. Out in the kitchenette, she starts a pot of coffee and boils water for a cup of tea before slipping up the stairs to the upper level.

He’s on the sofa when she enters, his jacket and tie draped over the armrest but his shirt and pants still the same as yesterday. Their eyes meet, and she immediately knows that she needs to shut the door behind her.

As she approaches him, she sees the thick folder on the coffee table in front of him, and a cold hand suddenly grips at her heart.

*Already?*

“What’s this?” she says, as though she hasn’t seen it before, crossing the carpet on bare feet and sitting down beside him.

This is what she was told to prepare for…but now that it’s here, she feels only fear.

He reaches out and rests his fingertips on the file, staring at his name on the cover. “The machine that you found me in yesterday,” he says slowly, “it was a memory machine—designed to help people uncover things they’ve buried.”

Melinda is listening, but she’s also taking in all the details of the room, looking for any signs of the symptoms Fury had told her to watch for. Seeing nothing, she turns her full attention on him. He doesn’t look mad, but he does look haunted.

“While I was in there, I saw the memory of Tahiti like I’ve always seen it—it was beautiful. But then it was like that layer got scraped away, and I saw the truth. I saw an operating theater and surgeons. I heard myself begging for death while a bot carried out a procedure on my exposed brain. It was all fake, Mel.” His eyes finally lift to hers, and she stares back, measuring the depth of the well he’s uncovered. “It was all just a dream that they planted in my mind. I tracked down the surgeon last night, and he confirmed it. I was dead for…days. When they revived me, they covered up that
memory with Tahiti. And this…” He flips open the file and shows her the surgery order right on top, “this was all done with Fury’s knowledge. How could he do that? How could he do that…and then keep a secret like that from me?”

Melinda stares down at the paper so that she doesn’t have to look at him, staring at the signature of the man who gave her this mission, the man who brought her friend back to life.

*Your orders are to keep him in the dark. Just because he knows he died doesn’t mean he knows how he was brought back. Unless…*

“Can I see this?” she asks quietly, laying one hand on his file and glancing up at him. He nods once, pulling his hand back.

“I’d be glad if you did,” he says as she pulls it in front of herself and starts slowly flipping through the pages, an appropriate speed as though she were reading it for the first time. It’s all as she remembers—the coroner’s reports, the charts from his recovery period, the orders given with Fury’s authority…

But there’s nothing in there about the serum used to bring him back. Nothing about the project that was researched for exactly this purpose. Just documents about his death…and then his restored life. Nothing bridging the gap between the two.

And that’s not the question he’s asking her now, anyway.

“Whatever Fury was thinking,” she says slowly, flipping past the photos of Phil's body on a slab because there will never be a time when she can easily stomach the sight of her friend cold with death, “he was trying to save your life…or give it back, I suppose. The question of why, however…that’s something you’ll have to ask him yourself.”

“I already tried contacting him,” Phil says, and Melinda glances up, masking her alarm. “Hill says he’s unreachable right now. No idea where he is.”

“You’d think the Director of SHIELD would have the decency to leave a number,” she mutters, attempting levity to distract him.

“If anyone knows how to disappear, though, it’s this Director,” Phil murmurs, dragging a tired hand through his hair. “He’s probably got secret bases all over the world—and I know he keeps even his commanders on a need-to-know basis.”

“If Fury thought you shouldn’t know something,” Melinda says slowly, “I’d want to believe he did it for my own good.”

He takes a long time to respond.

“I want to believe that too.”

*But I don't know if I can.*

They sit in silence for a few minutes, and Melinda stares at him until he looks over at her.

“What do you want to do?” she whispers.

It’s really the only question that matters, in the end. His answer determines what she does next.

He looks away and leans back into the sofa, sighing heavily. “I want to know why Fury didn’t tell
me."

She waits for the second part, but it never comes.

*He wants to know why. He doesn’t yet want to know how.*

*Good.*

“That’s a question only Fury can answer,” she repeats, closing the file in front of her. “You want to fill his inbox with messages? Go ahead. It will probably give him the right idea…probably make him less likely to call back, though.”

His face spasms slightly like he wants to smile for her but just can’t do it, and she’s thankful he’s not trying to fake it.

“Coffee?” she offers, standing and walking the file to his desk, where the tucks it in the open safe behind the frame and closes the metal door with a sound click. “I started a pot before I came up.”

He sighs tiredly, then stands and picks up his tie, looping it around his neck and starting to tie it again.

“That reminds me,” he says as she crosses back to the low table and picks up her tepid cup of tea, “where were you? I called because I’d walked around but couldn’t find you anywhere. Wondered if you’d left the base…or had left in some other way…”

Melinda hesitates for a moment, but she decides to go with the truth.

“Skye’s room,” she answers, meeting his eyes, and he raises his eyebrows has he finishes tying the tie. “She and I had some things we needed to talk about.”

“Anything I ought to know?” he asks carefully, reaching for his suit jacket and pulling it on.

She thinks again of the scars on Skye’s skin and the despair in a fourteen-year-old’s eyes, but she just shakes her head.

*That’s a part of Skye’s story that she has the right to tell the others herself if she ever wants to.*

So instead, she just tells one more truth.

“I think I’m ready to look into her past.”

November 20, 2013: Skye is 24

Coulson gives them three days of vacation after the Centipede mission, and Skye eagerly takes Simmons’ invitation to spend those days with her and Fitz on a quick road trip out to see the Grand Canyon. It’s not like she could go anywhere else, really—her van is still in a SHIELD garage somewhere, and she doesn’t have the credentials or the money to rent a car or borrow one from SHIELD. Surprisingly, however, Jemma offers her the keys of the SHIELD rental as they approach with their bags.

“Seriously?” Skye says excitedly, grabbing the keys before Jemma can change her mind.

The Brit grins at her. “Think of it as a celebratory joy ride after getting Coulson back and getting your bracelet off,” she says, throwing her bag in the trunk next to Fitz and Skye’s duffels.
“Yeah, and of course it’s the safest option since Jem and I don’t actually have licenses…” Fitz gets that much out before Simmons elbows him in the side. “Ow! What’s untrue about that?”

“So what were you gonna do if I didn’t come with you?” Skye asks, grinning because it’s really impossible to be angry at this pair. “Grand theft auto?”

“I’m sure that between the two of us we have more than enough knowledge necessary to operate a vehicle as simple as this,” Simmons says, climbing into the shotgun seat as Skye climbs in on the driver's side. “And it only takes a conscious effort for a person to make themselves drive on the right side instead of the correct side, which is, of course, the left…”

“This is where you’re supposed to give me my moment, Jemma,” Skye interrupts with a grin, firing up the engine of the small SUV. “This might be the only thing that I am qualified to do but you aren’t.”

They leave the city going fifteen over the speed limit, and Skye thinks this just might be her favorite drive of her life.

The desert is monotonous in some places, but the company makes up for it. They pool their stories from the last few days—everything that happened between Skye leaving the plane and the team showing up in the desert town. Later, the scientists take turns peppering her with questions about her life before and during the Rising Tide, questions that Skye can tell they’ve probably been taking bets on for months.

“No, I don’t have a criminal record,” she answers, smirking as she sees Fitz groan in the backseat. “…anymore,” she adds, grinning wickedly at Simmons’s surprised face. Fitz smiles and adds a tally on his tablet—Jemma now owes him three trips to the World Market for their favorite snacks (he owes her five). “I deleted it when I deleted my whole identity. You won’t find any electronic records of me anywhere.”

“Why would you do that?” Jemma asks curiously, looking over at her even as Skye fixes her eyes on the road.

“I don’t have any known family, remember?” Skye says, attempting to keep her tone light. “No diploma, no degree, no plans for retirement, so what difference would it make whether I existed on federal records or not? I could do a lot more good if any hacking I did couldn’t be traced back to an actual identity. And that life I deleted…well, there wasn’t really much worth remembering—even less worth saving.”

There’s a long silence after that, one that Skye’s heard before. It’s the uncomfortable silence of people who grew up well-loved and rooted deep in homes and cities and communities and friends, the uncertain pause where everyone wonders if they’re supposed to apologize or comfort or just move on after heavy words like those.

“So…are you saying that your driver’s license is a fake?” Fitz finally says from the backseat, just the right comment to burst the tension in the best way. “Are we being carried across state lines by a maniacal driver with a fake license?”

“Maniacal?” Skye responds, grinning at him over her shoulder. “I have been on my best driving behavior for you two so far. Come on, Fitz—this would be maniacal.”

She hits the button to open all the windows and the sunroof of the tiny car while also stomping on the gas, pushing their speed up as they blast down the deserted stretch of highway. Fitz drops his tablet and grabs at the seat while shouting at her, and Simmons covers her eyes, but Skye sees her
grinning even as she shrieks joyfully, her hair flying around her. Skye keeps her eyes on the road and makes them suffer for just under a minute before easing off the gas and rolling the windows back up.

“What the hell was that? You have some kind of death wish?!” Fitz snaps at her as he gathers himself in the backseat and fishes his tablet off the floor. Beside her, Simmons just giggles shakily, finger-combing her tangled hair, and Skye basks in the joy around her that she’s so glad she’s here to be a part of.

She thinks of the line on her wrist, currently hidden beneath the cuff of her new leather jacket, and she smiles to herself.

*No, Fitz, I don’t have a death wish.*

*Not anymore.*
Chapter Notes

May-centric chapter today, peeps.
Send cookies and good wishes if you can--I'm already having a rough time getting through the next few chapters. Y'all are in for it next week. :/  

November 23, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 24

May is sure that Coulson had intended for the few days’ vacation to be an actual break for their team, but she’s also sure that he knew she would not be leaving the plane as long as he was on it. Their Bus has stayed in the same hanger where May had parked it when they took off for the Mojave Desert to rescue Coulson last week, but the two of them have stayed in each others’ orbits while the younger members went their separate ways for the weekend. Fitz, Simmons, and Skye had piled into a car and left for the Grand Canyon, but Ward had taken a SHIELD motorcycle and driven off on his own without explanation. She’s not concerned. He’s been a decent--if reluctant--team player for months now; he's certainly earned a few days of solitude.

May has to admit, though, as she reads through yet another mission report from 1990 on a sofa in the quiet cabin, that she does notice the absence of the four younger team members. What might have been welcome quiet a few days ago is now an unsettling silence, a difference that makes their plane go back to being…just another plane.

With the Bus nearly to herself for the long weekend, she’s used most of her time to recalibrate with excessive time with her tai chi, making up for the inconsistency of the past week, and sleeping more than she’s slept in months. She hasn’t even time-traveled once. Coulson hasn’t left his office much in the last few days, despite her frequent invitations to spar, or run, or even eat with her. She knows he can see right through her attempts to distract him from the heavy thoughts he’s sifting through, which is why she’s even more worried by his unwillingness to indulge her with an interruption from following up any leads he can find in his file.

He’s on the hunt for answers, but she knows he won’t find anything.

She’s sent her mission logs to Fury, like she’s supposed to, but has received no return communication from the Director, and she can tell by Phil’s increasingly-visible frustration that he has not heard anything from the man either. He hasn’t even caught on to what she’s been doing in the mean time, carrying out her own investigation.

The file about Agent Avery had contained plenty of potential leads, but many of them have already led to (literal) dead ends—all but one. And May thinks this last thread might be the lead they need.

On Sunday evening, the three kids arrive back at the plane, sunburnt and windburnt from their days under cold desert sun, and Ward strolls back in not long after, easy grace that May knows he still works hard to project. The noise they all bring with them is a welcome change in the atmosphere, as is the immediate shift that she sees in Coulson’s mood as he descends from his office to welcome them back.

The six of them drift towards each other in the common area as the scientists and Skye race to tell the
funniest stories first while Ward opens bottles of beer and passes them around while looking more relaxed than he’s looked in months. Coulson just watches them all with barely-masked affection and asks the follow-up questions, and Skye is in the middle of all of them grinning and talking too fast and dragging Ward about ditching them and already joking about how Coulson was almost dead last week, and something in May’s heart shifts as she holds her own bottle and watches Skye, bright and strong and burning, pulling them all in until they orbit around each other.

May assembled this team, but she couldn’t have forced this if she’d wanted to.

She didn’t plan for this. She didn’t plan for her.

And for the first time, but she guesses not for the last, May offers up a silent thanks to whatever force of the universe caused it.

Thank you for bringing her here.

They finally drift apart when Simmons stifles her third yawn in a minute and excuses herself to shower, and Ward takes his chance to say goodnight and shut his door on the rest of them, and when Coulson’s phone rings and he goes upstairs to answer it, May slips away into her own bunk, though she leaves the door cracked.

Out of habit, she checks the search program that she has had running on her tablet for the last few days, but she nearly drops it in surprise when she sees the image waiting in her ‘possible match’ folder. She filters it multiple times and runs it through three more scanners. Everything comes back positive.

Yep. That’s him.

He’s in Mexico City.

A knock on her door makes her click the lock button on her tablet immediately, and she slides open the door to find Skye hovering in the shadows on the other side.

“Hey,” the girl says cautiously, not moving forward, but May steps back and gestures her in.

“Everything okay?” May asks after closing the door behind them and casually tucking her tablet in her desk drawer. “Feel better after a weekend away?”

Skye nods. “I think it was just what I needed,” she says, smiling. “Did you have a good weekend?”

Small talk?

Well, you did start it, Melinda...

May shrugs. “Sometimes, you need a few days of nothing,” she says ambiguously. “What have you got there?” she adds, nodding at the small, tissue-wrapped item she sees clutched in Skye’s hand.

The girl doesn’t seem surprised that she noticed, and offers it to May with a hopeful smile. “Something I got you at the Canyon. There was a trading post that we stopped at one day—they had a lot of Native arts and crafts for sale. I saw this and thought of you, so…”

Surprised, May takes the package. It’s feather light, and she unwraps the paper carefully.

Inside is a small dreamcatcher, barely as big as May’s palm, simply decorated and ending with trimmed rooster feathers at the end of the strands.
“I know it might not be your style, and you probably don’t believe in charms or things like that anyway,” Skye is saying quietly, her eyes on the dreamcatcher, “but you told me once that the most common time you travel is when you have nightmares, and with the days we’ve been having, I think you need all the sleep you can get. The story goes that if you hang one of these over your bed, that bad dreams get caught in the web and only good dreams make it down to you…” Skye trails off, looking embarrassed. “Anyway, I just…”

“Thank you, Skye,” May says sincerely, drawing Skye’s gaze to hers and offering her a small smile. Without waiting for her reply, she turns aside, putting one knee up on her bed and leaning over to hang the tiny object from the reading light on the wall beside her pillow. “How’s that?” she asks, turning back towards the girl.

Skye looks amazed, but she is smiling, her eyes bright. “Looks good. Let me know if it works.”

May nods, the smile lingering. “I will.”

Skye holds her gaze and pulls in a breath as though she has something else to say, but a knock on the door behind her makes them both jump. May hesitates for only a second, about to ask who’s on the other side, but Skye is already reaching for the door handle.

As the door slides open, Coulson looks extremely surprised to see Skye, but his gaze quickly slides past her to land on May.

“We’ll need to be airborne early tomorrow morning,” he says, his voice grim. “Agent Weaver just called from the SciOps Academy. She needs Fitz and Simmons there by oh-eight-hundred—there’s been an attack on students.”

Skye glances quickly between them and makes a not-at-all subtle exit. “Guess I’d better get to bed,” she says quickly, ducking around Coulson and disappearing into the shadows.

May doesn’t say anything, but she gestures Coulson into the room and shuts the door again.

“That’s nice,” he says, nodding towards the dreamcatcher on the wall—of course he already noticed. She ignores the comment.

“Is there any reason that you and I have to be at the Academy too, tomorrow?” she asks in a low voice, folding her arms across her chest.

Coulson shakes his head. “Not that I’m aware of. Why?”

May glances towards the drawer where her tablet is tucked, then meets his eyes again.

“I’ve got a lead on a SHIELD agent who should know something about Skye.”

November 24, 2013:

May’s done her share of stakeouts as an agent, but she’s never done one from the shotgun seat of a red corvette. After three hours of watching, Agent Lumley still hasn’t shown his face outside the forger’s shop, and Coulson seems to have had enough of her attempts to distract him from the chaos of thoughts that he won’t share with her. He says he still believes her, and that’s enough for her, since everything on her mission hinges on that.

Lumley, surprisingly, seems to have quite a bit of fight still in him despite twenty-plus years off the
grid. More surprisingly, he seems determined to lose on his own terms, as she sees when he plucks a telltale blue pill from a compartment in his watch.

Even more surprisingly, “SHIELD” seems to be the safeword, because as soon as Coulson corners Lumley on the fire escape, it’s the word that makes the man’s shoulders sag in relief.

“Oh, thank God,” the man sighs. “This is about the baby girl, isn’t it?”

Coulson makes him wait until they’re back on the plane to say anything else, and Lumley requests to ride in the trunk all the way back to the airfield. By the time they’re at cruising altitude headed back towards SciOps, May leaves the plane on autopilot and takes her place behind Coulson as he lays out Avery’s file in front of Lumley.

“She wasn’t the first one to die.”

The man touches the photo of his former partner’s mangled body and begins a story that makes May’s blood run cold.

“We were headed into the Hunan province of China—a senior agent had called in an 084—said the entire village had died trying to protect this one. Avery and I were fresh out of the Academy. There were five of us running the back end until we lost communication with the first team.”

May listens and tries to imagine that—she’d lost communication with a first team on the mission that wrecked her life, but she and Coulson had had years of experience by then…she’d once been a newbie agent stranded without an exit plan, but at least her commander had been alive to order her retrieval…but both at once?

Unthinkable.

“We went searching,” Lumley continues, “found the senior agent under a bridge. He had managed to escape with a gunshot wound to the neck, but he bled out. He was still holding onto the 084. Poor thing was covered in blood. We thought she was dead too, but she was just asleep in a dead agent’s arms.”

Wait.

May forces herself to breathe, forces herself to remain still.

*Did he just say…*

“The *baby*?” Coulson breathes out for both of them. “The *girl* was the 084?”

“If she had powers or something,” Lumley says with a shrug, “we never witnessed it.”

Coulson looks over at her, as if only needing May to confirm that she is hearing this too. She lets him see the shock in her eyes, then turns her gaze back to the haunted agent in front of them.

“The five of us helicoptered the kid off, headed home. After we landed, we started getting crossed off.”

“Executed?” Coulson says.

“Tortured, heads bashed in…and when it came down to Avery and I, we realized that the only way to keep our people and the kid from getting hunted—“

“…was to erase her from existence,” Coulson finishes.
“Avery was smart. She used the lead agent’s credentials to fake a level-8 clearance. She set up a nearly invisible protocol. The foster system was ordered to move the girl around every few months.”

“But they still got to Avery.”

For the first time, the hurt flickers across Lumley’s features. “She died protecting that secret.”

No, May thinks, barely breathing, she died protecting her.

“And you left town?” Coulson prompts the agent.

“Oh, I left everything,” the man says, the first traces of fear creeping back into his eyes. “I mean, whoever killed that village and that girl’s family and all those agents was a force to be reckoned with.”

But who was that?

May’s words finally break out. “And that girl—“

“Don’t tell me a damn thing about her,” Lumley cuts her off, waving her words away, “I don’t want to know, you understand. Just tell me…is she okay?”

Coulson holds the man’s gaze and gives him what he needs to know. “She’s safe.”

Lumley nods once, the relief evident once again. “Then maybe it was all worth it.”

Phil offers to drop him somewhere along the route, and May gathers up the contents of Avery’s file, her mind swirling with more questions than ever as she and Coulson move back towards the stairs to his office.

“Bit of advice?” Lumley calls after them, and they both look back expectantly. “Stop digging, and stay the hell away form that girl. Because wherever she goes, death follows.”

The miles between Mexico City and the Academy seem a lot longer on the return trip. Lumley parachutes out somewhere over the Keys, and May stays in the cockpit for the rest of the flight. Though she leaves the door unlocked, Coulson never surfaces, so she is left with her own thoughts for the entire trip. The questions turn over in her mind again and again, blowing in an unchangeable wind.

Back at the Academy, they have more pressing matters as a pair of badly-influenced students seed an honest-to-god supercell right above the school. May has to drop their plane straight through it all to fish out the guilty parties, one of whom is carried onto their plane without a heartbeat, killed by a lightning strike caused by his own invention.

The storm clears, she lands the plane, and May is alone with her thoughts until Coulson finds her at their bar to tell her that they’ll stay at least until tomorrow afternoon,

“Fitzsimmons asked for permission to stay another day in order to finish their lecture and help Agent Weaver put together the memorial service for Seth,” he says, pausing beside her, “so you should go ahead and get the plane to the Academy’s hangar for fuel and maintenance.”

“You told her, didn’t you?” May says, looking down into her drink, knowing she doesn’t need to say anything else.

“I had to,” he responds, and she doesn’t disagree.
“Must have destroyed her to hear that,” she says grimly.

But the disbelieving smile in his voice makes her look back. “That’s the thing about Skye,” he says, his eyes bright. “Her lifelong search led to stories of murder, and now it’s too difficult to continue. Her search is over. Her story ends here. But you know what she said?”

And May is surprised by how badly she does indeed want to know. “Tell me”

And he does.

*She said no--her story started here.*

*Her whole life, she thought she wasn’t wanted…*

*…that every family that took her in didn’t want her to stay,*

*…but all that time, it was SHIELD protecting her, looking after her.*

*… not the family she’ll never have but the one she’s always had.*

May listens, her chest pulling tight, and before she can overthink it she’s pulling out the folded piece of paper that’s been living in her pocket since her last visit to Skye’s past, unfolding it and sliding it in front of him on the bar. Her friend picks it up gently and smooths his fingertips over the faded dates on the left side of the paper, the three fresh dates on the right, and looks up at her with a question in his eyes.

May takes a deep breath, looks down at the paper, and lets her chaos of swirling thoughts out.

“Ever since we picked her up back in August, I’ve been wondering why she’s important enough to have gotten twenty-eight visits from me throughout her life. Sure, I go to my own past all the time… but why hers? I’ve known you for years, but I only visited your past once. I never traveled to Andrew’s past. And today, this agent says that wherever this girl goes, death follows…but, Phil, I have been too. Her whole life, I’ve been there—interrupting everything for a reason that I can’t figure out. And I’m so afraid of what that could mean.”

She looks back up at him and joins the threads.

“What if I’m the reason for all of it?”

Phil looks overwhelmed and confused. “What are you talking about, Melinda? The *reason* for it?”

“Phil…” she says slowly, pulling the thread of the haunting thought that’s nagged her since Mexico City. “What if whatever’s following her isn’t looking for her—it’s looking for *me*? What if I’m what death is really after?”

She sees the precise moment when he understands, because his face immediately hardens.

“No,” he says firmly, an outright denial, not even a suggestion. She looks away, but he presses. “That’s impossible, Melinda. Come on, think about it. You’ve been living in pretty much the same place since Skye was born. If someone wanted to find you, there are far more efficient ways to catch you than when you drop into the past for a few hours. I don’t think that’s what we’re seeing here.”

That logic makes sense, but the question remains. His next words surprise her, though.

“Look, I realize I never asked you…that visit you made to me when I was younger…did it finally happen for you?”
She closes her eyes slowly. “Yeah.”

He waits until she looks at him before he asks the next question, holding her gaze somberly. “Was it when I was dead?”

She nods once, falling back into the memory. In the weeks following the news of his death last year, she had been an absolute mess and had time traveled almost constantly for a few straight days. At one point, she had appeared, confused and cursing, in an unfamiliar place that she at first thought was a park, until she’d dived behind the first waist-high thing she saw and realized that it was a headstone. Her panic had caught the attention of the young man a few rows away, who had been persuaded surprisingly quickly to toss her the windbreaker he was wearing (“I promise I won’t run away with it”) and had listened indulgently when she fumbled out a nonsense explanation for what she was doing in a graveyard without clothes.

“Well,” the Phil beside her says, “a teenager visiting his dad’s grave to tell him he’s leaving this town for good…that’s bound to be a rough day. But it’s suddenly a lot less awful when there’s a woman showing up who knows your name and why you’re at that gravesite on that particular day, and she tells you that you’re making the right decision. That it’s okay to walk away from what’s familiar in exchange for what’s right. And the way you just sat down and listened, and asked me all these questions about myself and my family and my thoughts, it was like you knew that that day, I just needed someone to talk to, someone to share the struggle with. I had no idea where you came from, or where you disappeared to when my coat eventually fell empty on the grass, but I told myself something sent you—something that knew exactly what I needed that day.”

May feels her chest getting tighter and looks down at her own folded hands, pursing her lips. Phil keeps talking, though.

“How do you also remember few years after that when I had to go back to Manitowoc to bury my mom?”

She nods, still looking down. Phil reaches over and brushes his hand gently over hers.

“You remember that because you were there,” he says softly. “You didn’t need to time travel. You were able to come with me and be the same thing you were the last time I was in a graveyard—something steady. Someone to remind me that it was okay to hurt, but I wasn’t going to be alone.”

She looks up at him, finally understanding where he’s going with this.

Phil’s eyes are bright in the fading day. “I know you say you don’t know how it all works—why time turns inside-out for you and drops you back into the past without explanation—but there are stories you’ve told me that convince me that there are reasons for it sometimes. Maybe the universe knows what is needed, and sometimes it’s able to fill that need by sending you. With Skye…there was so much in her life that a little girl needs that she never had. And if what Lumley says is true, if death really follows wherever she goes, then maybe the universe sent her the best thing it could—it sent a shield to follow her too.”

May holds his gaze for a long moment before dropping her eyes to the List and pulling it in front of herself again.

“She deserves so much better,” she whispers, picking up the paper and slowly folding it again before tucking it into her pocket. She can let him hear that however he wants to.

“But she’s got us now,” he returns quietly as she shifts off her barstool and moves slowly towards the cockpit. “Whatever came before—it’s our turn to be that shield now.”
Not yours. Ours.

Whatever the reason that she was worth the lives lost, it's now this team's turn to keep her safe.

Those are heavy words, though, and May can only make herself walk away.

She gets the plane to the hangar and packs an overnight bag for everyone, catching a ride back to the school where their team is being put up in guest lodging in a dormitory for the night. She finds Simmons and passes off her and Skye's things, but when Ward opens his and Fitz's door and May sees that he's alone, she steps in and drops the duffle on the floor before grabbing the front of his shirt and hauling his lips down to hers.

He doesn't ask questions. He just locks the door.

November 25, 2013:

The lesson is over, it's time for them to head back to the plane, and no one can find Skye.

"She was in the auditorium during our speech," Fitz is saying, looking stressed on top of tired on top of grief-stricken. "I know that I saw her. But when I looked for her at the end, she was gone."

"Did she say anything strange to you last night?" Coulson asks Simmons, and May knows that he's thinking of the knowledge he dropped on the girl yesterday. "Or this morning?"

Simmons shakes her head, her brows knitting together. "She was awfully quiet last night and this morning, but I just assumed she was upset about Donnie."

"She's still not answering," Ward says, lowering his phone from his ear, and Coulson sighs.

"All right, let's go ahead and just assume her phone battery is dead and she forgot what time we're supposed to meet. I don't think she bailed on us—that's not Skye's style," he says, "so lets just keep it old school. Fitz, give us a game plan of places on campus to fan out and search. First person who finds her messages everyone else, and we'll just meet back at the plane."

But May slips away before Fitz can tell her which building to head to—she has a feeling she already knows where the girl is.

Skye is alone in the atrium in front of the Wall of Valor, still in yesterday’s clothes, her arms wrapped protectively around herself. As May steps quietly up beside her, she sees dark circles under the girl's eyes, a haunted look in them.

Skye doesn't look at May, but she does bite her lip and drop her eyes to the floor.

"Agent Avery," the girl says quietly. "And how many others? How many agents? How many innocent people? They all died because of me."

May has no idea how to respond to that, but she does reach over and brush her hand over Skye's shoulder. She sees the girl's face crumple, her mouth pulling against the pain, and finally Skye looks over at her, a trembling voice barely supporting her next words.

"They all died because of me, May, and then I tried to kill myself."

May's hand turns strong and curls around Skye's shoulder, an anchor in the waves.

"You might not have known then, but you know now," she says gravely, repeating only what they
both know is true. “And I’m sorry that you have to carry that now, but you aren’t carrying it alone. Coulson and I know it too. And we’re going to do our best to not let what those people died for be in vain.”

Skye is staring at her, the pain in her eyes a category-5 storm, and May tightens her grip, battening down the hatches.

“We’re not going anywhere, you understand?” May isn’t sure if she’s saying it to Skye or herself.

Skye nods, raising one hand to cover her face before the tears finally start spilling out, and May doesn’t think twice before stepping closer and wrapping her arms gently around the girl. It’s all the encouragement Skye needs to drop her face onto May’s shoulder, holding on tight as the storm hits.

May doesn’t know how long they stand there, Skye’s muffled sobs and sniffles echoing in the empty, vaulted room, but it’s the vibration of her phone that once again brings them back to the situation around them.

“We need to go,” May whispers, and Skye nods against her shoulder before lifting her head. Her face lingers close to May’s for just a moment, her eyes still shimmering, and May reaches up to thumb a smear of makeup gently off Skye’s cheek.

“Okay?” she asks, not moving back.

Skye’s eyes remain on hers, almost expectantly, for a second longer, before she drops her eyes and nods, taking a half step back and withdrawing her arms. May waits as the girl dries her own tears, then falls into step beside her as Skye moves without further prompting towards the door.

As they step out into paradoxically bright sunshine on the storm-ravaged campus, May feels Skye’s hand slip cautiously into hers. She glances over and sees Skye asking the question in her eyes, looking like she expects May to shake off her touch. But even though everything in her says she has to be crazy to choose this battle, May simply holds her gaze and tightens her grip, ready for the next storm, whenever it comes.
Triggers

Chapter Notes

This could have been two chapters, but I think that just would have made it worse. I seriously need a blanket and a hug.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

November 28, 2015: Skye is 24, May is 44

A stretch of Italian countryside isn’t the place Skye thought she’d find herself firing a loaded gun for the first time, but here she is.

It’s mid-morning, and they’re parked at an abandoned construction lot in Tuscany while Coulson goes to meet with the local authorities and explain the situation. Ward had seemed impressed by the dark circles around Skye’s eyes when she had made it down to the cargo bay for morning drill, but he at least waited until she was more awake to comment on her appearance.

“You should make sure you’re getting at least six hours of sleep a night,” he cautions her between strength training and weapons training, offering a cup of coffee from the machine in the lab. “Your reaction time gets slower the more tired you are. Operations are demanding enough without adding sleep deprivation when it can be prevented.”

“I got the jump on Quinn, didn’t I?” she grumbles, carrying the coffee and the gun case as she follows Ward out of the open cargo ramp and into the fresh morning air.

Her big break had come yesterday afternoon, actually, which was why Coulson had put them on a course to Italy immediately and contacted the proper authorities already—the package was due to be delivered tomorrow, and Coulson wanted to intercept while Quinn might still believe that SHIELD wasn’t yet close on his heels. She had spent the entire flight and the rest of the evening following the money trails out to other leads, but that wasn’t what had kept her awake until the small hours of the night.

At that time, she’d been scouring all the SHIELD archives she could access, reading about 0-8-4s.

“It’s good to be driven,” Ward says as they hike to the edge of the lot, “but you still need to take care of yourself. You’re no good to anyone dead.”

“That’s awfully sweet of you, Ward,” she mumbles. “You’re really laying it on thick today.”

“Drink your coffee,” her S.O. fires back with mock annoyance, gesturing for her to stop where she is while he starts pacing off the distance to a leftover pile of dirt that’s nearly fifteen feet tall.

Skye knows that she’s been lagging on marksmanship, mostly because it’s impossible to safely do any actual target practice on a plane. Ward sets up a few (hopelessly small) cardboard targets in the side of the dirt pile while Skye nurses her coffee and breathes the gloriously damp Mediterranean air, staring up at the cerulean sky arching above them.

“I never thought I’d get to see Italy,” she comments as Ward returns to her side, marking off a distance line with his foot before sitting down with her in the gravel and opening the gun case.
He makes her drill the assembly and disassembly of the gun several times before standing up and having her drill through form and posture. Then, he hands her a pair of ear protectors and sunglasses while he loads a clip into the gun.

“All right—time to start getting used to the real thing,” he says, standing directly behind her and pointing at the targets. “This is going to have a lot more kickback than the night-night pistol, so just be ready for that.”

Skye steps up to the line in the dirt and sets her stance before she flips off the safety and cocks the gun. She exhales as she raises the weapon, lining up the sights.

A taunting voice threads through her mind.

You have what it takes to pull the trigger?

She exhales again.

How hard can it be?

She squeezes the trigger and—oh…

The tiny explosion inside the weapon that launches the bullet nearly faster than sound is strong enough that her teeth rattle and her hands feel like they were just struck with a hammer. She gasps, lowering the gun immediately but keeping it pointed away from her feet like Ward’s drilled into her from the beginning.

“Whoa,” she breathes, looking at the puff of dirt (two feet above the target) where her bullet had struck.

“Something else, huh?” Ward says behind her, his voice muffled through her ear protectors.

“Yeah…” Skye says slowly, breathing deeply to calm herself down, looking down at the gun and marveling at the power contained in such a small weapon.

So that’s how people die.

“Again,” Ward orders patiently, and she raises the gun once more.

Get over yourself, Skye. Someday you just might have to pull the trigger.

They spend the next half-hour outside with him methodically correcting her aim and her stance and her only managing to nick the targets a few times before finally getting off a shot that hits one of the targets (close to) dead center, and she finds herself grinning as she looks over her shoulder for Ward’s reaction.

Her surprise is doubled though when she sees not Ward but May watching from a couple of feet behind her, fingers in her ears and dark aviator sunglasses glinting in the sunlight.

The woman seems to register Skye’s surprise immediately and lowers her hands. “Coulson needed Ward on comms to help translate a transaction,” she says in explanation, loudly enough to get through Skye’s ear protectors. “He and I are both pretty hopeless when it comes to Italian.”

“So he left you to make sure I don’t shoot myself in the foot?” Skye says as she sets the safety on her gun before turning fully around.

“Never leave a kid alone with a dangerous toy,” May says, stepping closer. The older agent takes the
gun from her hands and removes the magazine and the loaded bullet while gesturing for Skye to take her ear protectors off.

“Show me how you raise and sight,” the woman says, offering Skye the butt end of the empty gun and stepping in front of her.

“What?” Skye asks, disturbed. “May, I’m not going to point a gun at you.”

“You are rarely going to be pointing a gun at anything inanimate,” May says candidly, taking a few steps back but staying directly in front of Skye. “You’re going to be pointing that gun at people. You don’t want to do that? Fine. But what if someone’s pointing one right back at you?”

Skye bites her lip before setting her stance and slowly raising her gun until it’s pointed at May’s chest.

“Relax,” May says, clearly scrutinizing Skye’s face. “I’m not going to make you shoot at me; I just want to make sure the first time you point a gun at someone isn’t on a mission. Now stand easy, and then show me how quickly you can go from relaxed to ready.”

May makes her drill through that movement a few times, calling verbal corrections to Skye’s form before moving to stand beside her and watching the movement from that angle. Skye tries to relax as she listens to the woman’s patient instruction, though she only tenses further when May approaches her and steps directly behind her.

“These,” the woman says just behind her ear and pressing her hands lightly down on Skye’s shoulders, and Skye tries not to shiver, “need to be down and relaxed, not up there in your ears. And it will probably be better for you if you’ll get used to having this foot—“ May tugs on the pantleg covering Skye’s right leg, and Skye shifts her foot back a few inches “—back a little. It’s a more forgiving posture, easier to fall into while moving.”

Skye practices the movement a few times, very aware of how close May is now standing.

“Has the dreamcatcher worked?” she asks, deciding to press her luck as long as May’s in a good mood.

“Dreamless sleep a few nights in a row,” the woman says, looking up from where she’d been watching Skye’s feet, “but I broke the streak last night. Woke up in my office in the Triskellion and was stuck there for over an hour.”

“That’s DC, right?” Skye says, letting her arms relax and turning slightly towards May. “And a building full of agents? Didn’t you get caught?”

May shakes her head. “It was night, thank god. But even before I started time-traveling, I’d researched the security systems and worked out safe places to hide and which places to dodge. I figured I’d end up there at some point.”

“Is Coulson still the only other agent who knows?” Skye asks in a low voice even though they’re still a hundred yards from the plane.

“The only one I’m aware of,” May says, then seems to sense the change in the air and offers Skye the clip again. “Load up and try firing with the new stance.”

Skye snaps the magazine back into the pistol and cocks it, noticing how heavy the gun feels once again.
How do they do this every day?

“Feel like showing off?” she asks, offering the butt of the gun to May.

The glasses block it, but Skye can still feel the glare come back. She attempts a playful smile.

“Come on. For almost twenty years I had no idea you were an agent—I never could have guessed you had all these secret skills. We all know you’re an absolute ninja, but I’ve never seen you pull a trigger. Show me what kind of skills I have to look forward to if I keep this up for the next twenty years.”

But May shakes her head, folding her arms across her chest.

“Don’t make me your goal. I wouldn’t wish the person I am on anyone.”

It’s not said with anger; May delivers the statement with unsettling straightforwardness. But the words make Skye’s heart twist painfully in her chest, and just like that, they’re back to where they always seem to end up:

With Skye still somehow knowing everything and nothing—how things will end, but not knowing how in the world they’ll ever get there.

They’re interrupted at that moment though by the sound of a Corvette's engine roaring up the road, and they both look around in time to see Lola roll up the ramp of the plane in a trail of dust. Automatically, they both move back towards the shadow of their Bus, Skye only remembering at the last second to go back and gather up all their gear.

“What'd they say?” Skye calls to her leader as she strides up the ramp, the gun case and empty coffee cup dangling from her hands.

Coulson looks like he’s had a little too much espresso as he jogs up the spiral staircase to the cabin.

“Approved,” he calls proudly. “We’re going in. Come on in—mission conference in five.”

The train is rolling out tomorrow at 12:45 pm local time, and they’re all going to be on it.

May and Ward—front and center, tactical operations.

Skye and Fitz—on the train but out of the action, running communications.

Coulson and Simmons—oh god, he’s really going to try to put Simmons in undercover?

But Coulson is insistent—if everyone else is going in, they’re not leaving Simmons alone on the plane. She’ll be with Coulson the whole time—what could go wrong?

“May, you up for being on top?” Coulson says without looking up from the holocom, meaning he misses the withering glare that May shoots Ward before the younger agent can smirk to himself. Across the table, Skye looks away awkwardly.

Okay, so that’s still going on...

It should be awkward, knowing that Ward and May are…whatever it is that they’re doing…even if Ward doesn’t know that she knows. Skye had a lot of time to think about that during the silent parts of her road trip last weekend, even if she hasn’t been able to vent about it to anyone.

The whole thing made sense, really, when she thought about it objectively—May and Ward are both
Specialists, they both have ways of dealing with things that don’t seem to involve talking about them, they understand what the other does on a daily basis far better than Skye can at this point—they’re really a much better match than her and May seem to be. And even as Skye had tried to work up frustration, at them or at herself, she had known that it was pointless.

They *don’t* know what’s going to happen. Which, technically, *neither* do you.

All you know is how this ends.

**So what’s the problem?**

“Ward, you’ll need to go swipe a conductor’s uniform from the local station,” Coulson is saying beside her, and Skye refocuses on the mission. “Simmons will drop the compound, May will tail the mark, and then you’ll place the tracker. Skye,” Coulson turns to her, and her attention snaps back to him, “you and Fitz should plan to hole up in the oversize luggage car—which one of you wants to practice pickpocketing in order to get the conductor’s keys?”

Skye doesn’t try to stop her own smirk from creeping across her face.

“I can do that already,” she announces, trying hard not to sound smug.

Her teammates look at her with expressions that are various blends of doubt and surprise. “What?” she shrugs. “It’s an important life skill that someone taught me when I was younger.”

When she lets her gaze linger on May, the older agent stares back, understanding unfolding in her eyes.

*You may not have taught me about guns, but you taught me a few things.*

Skye’s already booked their tickets on the train, but they need props and costumes for this op. With Fitzsimmons busy preparing their gear for the next day and May apparently hopeless when it comes to Italian, Coulson assigns Ward the trip to town to pick everything up, which her S.O. is clearly *thrilled* about.

“I let me go with you,” Skye insists, grabbing her jacket and wallet and chasing him down to the cargo hold, directing her reasons towards Coulson in the lab. “Come on, Coulson—I think you know how this will turn out if you send a man to do a woman’s job.”

“I’m sending an *agent* on a *mission,*” Coulson reminds her clearly as he hands a card to Ward (*okay they seriously make SHIELD credit cards? Subtle...*), but his eyes are smiling. “I’ll let you go and get some more *field experience.*”

Skye grins as she dashes after Ward to the SUV. Thanks, A.C!” she calls out the window before they roll away.

Ward is quiet for most of the drive to the nearest town big enough to boast an outdoor store, and Skye is content to just stare out the window, watching the gold-and-green countryside roll by.

“Join SHIELD, give up your whole life, get your butt kicked in training, all so that you can travel to exciting locations, meet interesting people, chase down sleazy millionaires…you guys really should make a brochure,” she says at one point grinning out at the scenery.

“What *were* you planning to do with your life?” her S.O. responds, and she glances over at him, a little surprised that he’s attempting conversation. He glances briefly over at her but returns his gaze to the road as he continues.
“Seriously—living in a van, hacking into top-security organizations—was that the career you’d been dreaming about since you were a kid? Did you see that being the rest of your life? Or did you always know it couldn’t last forever?”

“Living in a van is a lifestyle choice,” she defends with a smirk. “No roommates, low maintenance, mobility, no rent…what’s not to love?”

“And the hacking?” Ward presses. “How did you even get into that?”

Skye looks away as he glances over again, considering how to word her answer. She had gotten into hacking entirely because of her search for her family—but after the battle of New York, the Rising Tide had been the natural conclusion of her curiosity and frustration. She had always known that there are only two ways a hacker’s career ends: every company and government becomes totally transparent, or the hacker gets caught. When she had thought about the future, she had never thought about which one would happen to her (though the first was impossible and the second was more or less inevitable)—her only certainty had been May.

May was the only thing fixed, the only thing that mattered.

Someday, wherever she was, May would be there, for better or worse.

May would be there, they would be part of a family together, and she would stay.

“Just trying to make the world a better place,” Skye eventually says with an attempt at levity, “Isn’t that how you ended up in SHIELD?”

Ward huffs out a suggestion of a laugh, shaking his head. “Let’s just say I had put myself in a bit of a corner as far as options for my future went, but SHIELD gave me a chance when they probably shouldn’t have. You can appreciate that, can’t you?”

It’s a dig, but a friendly one, so Skye reaches over and smacks his (ow, fuck—very firm) shoulder. “Let’s make a deal, dude,” she says with a grin. “If we successfully bag Quinn tomorrow, then you agree to stop reminding me of my numerous shortcomings and untrustworthiness. Unless it’s your birthday—on your birthday you can say whatever you want. Deal?”

He looks over at her, and he’s actually smiling with something close to affection in his eyes.

“Deal.”

They use a company credit card to buy two enormous backpacks for her and Fitz, pairs of glasses for Simmons and Coulson, and an urn (oh god Simmons, why??), which Skye buries in Fitz’s backpack under the fur coat they picked up for May to wear over her tac suit. Ward swipes a hat and jacket from the employee locker room at the local train station, and they’re just about to make their getaway when Skye double-checks the train timetable on the walls and notices the date.

“Hey Ward?” she says cautiously as they climb back into the car and stuffs the stolen duffel behind his seat. “Could we make one more stop before we head back?”

May:

“You really think they’re all ready for this?” May asks from her place on Coulson’s sofa as she reads through Russo’s reports a second time, the sky outside the windows already purple with late-autumn dusk. At his desk behind her, her friend sighs.
“I don’t think we ever really think our students are ready, do we?” he says, closing the file he has been reading. “I remember when I sent Amador out for her first solo retrieval, I could barely eat for the entire week she was gone.”

May smirks, glancing over at him. “Pretty sure that’s when your hairline started receding. I was so afraid you’d be bald before she got back, you made me break out the big guns.”

“You call flipping my entire house ‘the big guns’?” he says critically, but she can hear the smile in his voice.

That particular prank had involved her breaking into his house when he was out and turning everything upside down—the books, the table, the pictures, the sofa cushions, the cereal boxes—or flipping everything (all his clothes had been re-hung inside out, all the pillows and blanket were under the fitted sheet). She had left a very obvious camera on top of the TV to catch his reaction when he got home, and it was well worth the effort.

“Do you have any idea how much time that took me?” she deadpans, though she’s smirking to herself. “I wouldn’t go to such great lengths for just anyone, you know.”

He snorts, sighing almost nostalgically. “I know.”

There’s something wistful in his tone, and she lets it seep into her for just a moment as they sit in silence. She cracks a metaphorical door and lets those memories in—the relatively carefree years before Bahrain had flipped her world upside-down.

She had thought, at that time, that that would be the worst thing to ever happen to her.

Then he had died, and she’d discovered that she’d been wrong.

*Even the most seasoned agents can’t prepare for everything,* she thinks, remembering the seam over his sternum and the bullet-wound scar on her calf.

*But this isn’t a combat op,* she reminds herself. *Simple retrieval. In and out. Cybertek shouldn’t even know that we’re there.*

They’re both stirred out of the moment by the sound of heavy feet ascending the staircase, and Ward appears in the doorway, a strange expression on his face.

“Could you two come downstairs?” he says vaguely, waiting until he sees them both start to stand before moving back towards the stairs.

“Everything all right?” Coulson calls after him, rounding his desk.

“Just…come on,” Ward calls back, and Coulson exchanges a look with May as they head towards the doorway.

She smells it before she sees it.

The others are clustered in the kitchenette around the corner booth where May sees plates and bowls of food laid out, an apparent selection of the best that this part of Italy has to offer. Simmons is exclaiming over it all as she pulls more empty plates from the cabinets, and Ward is passing tumblers from the bar over to Fitz, who is filling them with wine.

“What’s all this?” Coulson asks for them both as he and May approach the table. The others look at Skye, who ducks her head, though May catches a glimpse of an expression that seems strangely
“I know we have a mission tomorrow and everything,” the girl says, her hands tightening slightly on the back of the booth, “but it’s…I just thought it would be great if we could…I mean, we’re in Italy, which is supposed to be the best cuisine on the planet, so why not indulge?”

She looks up and offers a sunny smile, one that’s obviously meant to cover something else, and May suddenly remembers where she’s seen that expression before—on a nine-year-old’s face, embarrassed by her own hope, wishing desperately for something that she knows she will probably be denied.

“You didn’t have to get all this for everyone,” Coulson is saying as they step up to the table and see the pasta, bruschetta, pizza, salads, and tiramisu crowding into the dishes.

“Well, you know,” Skye says, offering them both empty plates, “I can’t really cook, but I’ve perfected the art of carry-out. I mean, Ward did the ordering, I did the carrying.”

“Sure, but why tonight?” Fitz asks, ducking around May to offer Skye a glass of wine. “I mean, this is wonderful, don’t get me wrong, but we could have celebrated after the mission tomorrow…”

And before Skye answers, May remembers the date and puts the pieces together.

“Today’s Thanksgiving, isn’t it?” she says quietly. Out of the corner of her eye, she sees Coulson close his eyes in understanding.

Skye looks down, shrugging. “I know, I know—we’ve got a lot more important things to worry about, we can’t really stop and celebrate, but…”

And May hears the hesitant hope, the unspoken wish.

This is the first time I’ve had a family to spend it with.

Oh, Skye.

“Well, this looks great,” Coulson says with a warm smile and timely grace, moving all of them in the right direction. “Let’s dig in before it all gets cold.”

May, Skye, and Fitzsimmons crowd into the booth while Coulson and Ward carry the rolling chairs up from the lab and add themselves around the other sides of the table. They pass out the plates and serve each other from the bounty of dishes, hands and elbows colliding with every reach and forkful, the low light glinting off drinks and smiles as they dig in while the night settles around the plane.

At one point, Skye seems to remember something and dashes to her room, returning with personal-sized plastic-wrapped apple pies, which she passes around the table.

“Oh, so this is what they’re for,” Simmons grins as she opens hers. “I was wondering why you bought so many back at that petrol station on the way back from the Canyon.”

“Well, I’d like to say that I had this in mind back then,” Skye grins back, “but I kind of have a weakness for gas station snacks. I was really just stocking up in preparation for a long stint out of the States.”

They all laugh, and Coulson pours out a second bottle of wine (“I’m cutting you guys off after this though—no one needs to be hung-over tomorrow”), and May lets the warmth of the moment soak through her until it’s all she can feel.
Once again, she looks at Skye and sees that variable that she hadn’t planned for, the one that Phil called an asset and she had called a risk, the one laughing at the dismay on Simmons’s face as she tastes her dessert and declares that no one in Skye’s country has any right to call this a pie…

And again, May doesn’t know who to thank, but it’s Thanksgiving, so she feels that she might as well acknowledge it.

*Thank you for bringing her here.*

When they’re all full and sleepy and the plates are almost empty, Phil raises what’s left of the wine in his glass, looking across the table at the girl at May’s elbow.

“To Skye,” he says. “Thank you for my first Thanksgiving dinner in at least ten years.”

“Same,” Ward says, raising his glass. “…And maybe the first one I’ve ever enjoyed.”

“My first one ever,” Simmons adds, lifting hers in time with Fitz.

“And mine,” he says with a smile, his eyes soft.

May picks up her glass. “Mine too,” she says honestly. It wasn’t a holiday her family ever celebrated.

Skye looks around at them and purses her lips, and when she picks up her glass, unshed tears cling to her lashes.

“Thank you all…” she starts to say, but her voice quivers, and May reaches beneath the table to rest her hand lightly on Skye’s knee. The girl looks over at her, eyes shining, and May lifts her glass just a little higher.

“Happy Thanksgiving, everyone. To friends and family,” she says, and they all touch glasses. The others drink, and May looks over at Phil and sees his eyes linger on hers just a second longer, and May knows that they’re both thinking the same second toast.

*To the family she found. To the family she’s always had.*

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**November 29, 2013: Skye is 24, May is 44**

She’s never been on a train before.

Since Coulson let her be in charge of buying everyone’s tickets, she had made sure that he and Jemma were in another car than her and Fitz, mostly because Skye knows she would definitely not be able to keep a straight face seeing the two of them undercover together. The backpacks that she and Ward had picked up the day before are stuffed with blankets from their Bus, making them look *full but thankfully not heavy*, Skye thinks as she squeezes through the bottleneck of the train car juncture ahead of Fitz, not even needing to act to come across as an excited tourist.

*This is so cool!*

She sees a dark shape coming down the aisle and automatically moves out of the woman’s way. May, looking for all the world like Cruella DeVille with her dark fur coat and red lipstick, glides by without even acknowledging Skye’s presence—or is that a smirk?

Fitz is understandably appalled at her attempt at a Scottish accent, but his American accent is nearly flawless as they approach the conductor and distract him while Skye discreetly lifts his key ring and
tucks them into her pocket. They make their way to the luggage car and set up shop amidst crates and oversize luggage, watching as May’s goggles come online and reveal a rooftop view of the Italian countryside.

*Now that’s a way to see Italy…*

May gets eyes on the cargo in the dining car, and Skye sighs, deciding now’s as good a time as any to gather more facts for this new set of questions that Coulson’s knowledge-bomb had delivered last week.

“Any chance that what’s in there could be an 0-8-4?” she says, trying to sound casual.

“This?” Fitz asks, pointing at the crate on the screen. “No. We may not know what it is but we do know that it came from Cybertek.”

“Have you ever heard an of an 0-8-4 being a person?”

She can tell that he thinks she’s being silly. “No. Though I suppose it’s possible. I’d hate to meet the guy.”

Their ears are both suddenly full of static, and her feed from May’s goggles goes blank.

“Someone’s using a scrambler,” she realizes immediately, and Fitz’s expression moves straight to panic.

“Cybertek knows we’re here,” he says at the same moment the realization crashes into her, and she jumps to her feet.

“I have to warn our team!”

She only takes two steps though before man bursts through the door ahead of her, a pistol held ready to fire.

“Fitz get down!” Skye shouts, diving behind a shelf.

The man’s bullets take out their computers and comms, and Fitz fires the night-night gun around the corner, causing the hostile to swerve back against the shelf. When the train lurches into a curve and the man staggers for balance, Skye rushes in and swings at him, grabbing a heavy mail sack off the shelf and bringing it down on his arm, knocking the gun out of his hand. When the man gets an arm around her throws her to the floor, she hears Fitz tackle him himself, followed by the expected sound of the engineer getting decked hard across the face. Skye snatches up the man’s pistol, pointing it at him as she advances.

*You have what it takes to pull the trigger?*

But then the man has a glowing blue grenade in his hand and Simmons is rushing in behind him—

“We’ve been made!” the girl is shouting, and the man turns just enough for Jemma to see the grenade and her face to morph straight from panic to exasperation “Oh bloody hell!” and she is grabbing for the device but when he spins it out of reach she grabs him instead, wrapping herself around him.

*Oh god no Simmons, no!*

There’s a pulse, a pop, and Simmons and the agent’s bodies pulse as though struck with a hammer between them. A familiar blue aura clouds the air around them.
And then they both hit the floor.

May:

She should have known as soon as their comms went down—security teams only come prepared with communications scramblers when they know to expect trouble.

Now, as she gasps awake under a drench of cold water and sees Russo and three—no, two—men surrounding her in what looks like a workshop or wheelhouse of some kind, May kicks herself for not seeing this coming.

_Bastard sold us out._

“Get your bearings, sweetheart,” the Italian is saying as she gasps and shakes the water out of her eyes, analyzing the room, the weapons, her bindings, and the vehicles outside, in the space of three breaths…

“I realize you’re confused, but I’m here to help,” the man continues, his hands landing briefly on her hips before her flinging water makes him step away. “You see, I make sure Cybertek packages move across Italy without incident, and they make sure I’m well taken care of. They’ll take care of you too. All you have to do is tell me where Agent Coulson and Ward are.”

Inside, May breathes a sigh of relief.

_Good—they didn’t find them. Must mean they woke up and got away before Russo arrived._

Her moment of panic when she’d crossed the tracks and seen Coulson’s motionless body sprawled in the dust had nearly done her in, but she’d kept control and forced her heart-rate down before standing and searching for a vehicle after checking them both for a pulse. Once she’d gotten them to safety, they could make a plan to re-board the train and find the rest of the team…

The urgency of that task suddenly hits May all over again.

_The kids are still on the train._

She really needs Russo to get on with whatever he’s got planned if she’s going to get back to her team, so she lets herself smile mockingly at him.

“Why are you smiling?” the man asks indulgently.

She bares her teeth and hopes there’s blood in her mouth.

“You called me sweetheart.”

The condescension works like a charm.

Russo rolls his eyes and removes his glasses. “Fine,” he grumbles, turning towards the table of tools. “Have it your way. Just remember, your boss asked to be part of this assignment. I warned him against it. So if you’re looking for someone to blame—” he brandishes a paring knife “look to him.”

_If he’s smart, he’ll start with the feet—maybe if you kick him hard enough he’ll cut you down and tie you to a chair so that you’re low enough to punch…_

But he raises his arm and stabs her in the shoulder, right where her muscles are pulled taut, and she cries out to cover her relief as he drags the knife slowly down her skin. It’s a shallow wound, chosen
to hurt but not to maim.

*Amateur.*

She snarls again and lets him think it’s a smirk.

“That’s just what I needed.” *This couldn’t have worked out better…*

As soon as Russo turns away, she hauls herself up and plucks the knife from her flesh, and then everything happens very quickly.

She gets only one slash in on Russo, but she takes out the other two men with barely a passing thought to her shoulder. It’s not until she’s in the other 4x4 speeding towards the airstrip where they left the Bus that she remembers to apply pressure to the wound.

She parks the car out of sight and slips up to the plane only a minute or two ahead of Russo.

*He must have called Coulson from the car.*

She waits for the confirming evidence of the Italian striding up the ramp with a gun in his hand before swinging out behind him and throwing the knife in a perfect spin straight into the man’s back.

*Now we’re even, traitor.*

Coulson and Ward look understandably shocked by her appearance, but she shakes them both off and stands in her underwear under the shower spray as soon as she gets the tac-suit off. The wound in her shoulder is long, but shallow, which is a relief, since she can’t really coexist with stitches anymore. She’s in the barest amount of clothing with her hair still dripping all over the carpet when she climbs into her pilot’s chair and directs the plane in a vertical takeoff.

Ward and Coulson are both busy on comms by the time she slips back through the cabin to the lab to get her wound cleaned up, but she’s not surprised when Coulson catches up with her.

“We found the train. Turns out, it switched tracks.” His touch is gentle and methodical has he smooths the ointment over the wound. She can hear the regret in his voice as he speaks towards her shoulder. “It wasn’t supposed to be a combat op.”

She thinks of the three non-combatants they left in harm’s way, the three that she and Ward had both made such a fuss about months ago. Yesterday, none of them had even thought to insist that any of those three stay behind.

*We brought them into all this.*

*It’s on us to fix the problem.*

“They’ll be all right,” she says softly, looking over his shoulder too. “They can handle themselves.”

She’s not sure who she’s trying to reassure.

Coulson lays a fresh pad of gauze over the wound and helps her move the strap of her tank back up over it just before Ward slips into the room.

“We need to re-route the plane.”

_Skye:_
They had left Simmons in the train with a night-night gun in her hands and followed Cybertek from the train to a villa, and sure enough, there’s the slimeball himself, Ian Quinn, shaking hands with the delivery man.

“We can’t let Quinn get away,” she thinks out loud as she and Fitz crouch behind the topiaries. “Coulson wouldn’t let that happen. He wouldn’t want us to let that happen.”

Fitz gives her a night-night gun and agrees to disable their cars while she goes in.

“Be careful, okay?” he says solemnly before he stands up, his eyes serious.

She looks at the fist imprint on his face as she returns the commission.

“You too.”

She uses the landscaping for cover as she sneaks up, hugging the wall of the house like Ward taught her. There’s only one guard at the back door, but he’s big enough that she shoots him twice before he goes down.

*That’s how you pull a trigger.*

The back of the house is empty, but she darts around a corner just before the blonde from the train strides out of a doorway down the hall, talking about Quinn’s “purchase” downstairs.

Skye holds her breath until she can’t hear their footsteps anymore, then slips down the hall and through the door they just exited.

*Maybe I can just tag the purchase and then we can track Quinn if he leaves…*

A stone staircase leads down to rows of old wooden doors, and she opens the only shut one to see casks and bottles of wine glinting on the walls. The black case from the train sits on an impressive wooden table, still closed and locked. Against the back wall, however, beneath a slant of golden dusk streaming through a high half-window, is something she’s never seen before, something glass and metal and glowing.

She lowers her gun and steps closer, peering through the glass at the body of a person she thought died a few weeks ago.

“Mike.”

“Hello, Skye,” a voice says behind her. Even as she spins, a hand rips her gun away, and she finds herself looking down the barrel at Quinn and one of the Cybertek men. One of them keeps a gun on her while Mike is extracted from the weird pod-thing, and Skye gasps as he stirs and straightens, revealing a stump where his right leg used to be. The package contains just what he needs though, a robotic leg that whirs to life and adjusts itself to his height, machinery clanging on the stone floor.

Quinn sends out a the Cybertek rep and turns towards Mike, who won’t acknowledge Skye in any way.

“I know you get your orders from the Clairvoyant, so that means you’re not allowed to hurt me, right?” the millionaire asks.

Mike doesn’t respond, and Quinn smiles smugly as he pulls a small pistol out of his jacket, cocking it and pointing it at Mike’s heart.
“What if I tried to hurt you?” he says cheerfully, cocking the weapon. “Would you stop me?”

Mike looks down at the gun, then back up to Quinn. “No. I would not.”

“Mike…” Skye says slowly. “Listen…I do not know what they’re doing to you, but we have to get out of here, now.”

“And if I wanted you to hurt her,” Quinn says, pressing the gun into Mike’s hand and pointing it at Skye. Involuntarily, she shudders, taking a half step back. “You know, kill her? Will you? I mean what would hurt Agent Coulson more than to lose his pet project?”

Skye can’t read Mike’s expression. She’s sure they can all hear her heart thundering in her chest.

Come on Mike, come on Mike, point it at Quinn and just end this…

But Mike only lowers the gun.

“Those aren’t my orders,” he says flatly, pressing the gun back into Quinn’s hand. “She’s not who I’m supposed to kill.”

The man moves towards the door, already disappearing through it before Skye can get her legs to work. “Wait!” she cries, dashing after him, only to see his two mismatched feet disappearing at the top of the stairs.

She turns back to Quinn, fury rising up in her chest.

“What the hell did you do it him?” she demands, advancing on the man.

She hears a bang that bursts her eardrums, sees a flash like a match being lit, and it feels like someone has poked her hard on the stomach.

What?

A bullet casing clatters to the ground, as Quinn lowers the gun.

What...

Her hand flies to her chest, and she looks down to see the telltale red spilling across it as the man steps closer, catching her with one arm and hugging her to his own body as her legs suddenly give out. The next bullet feels like a sword going through her, and suddenly her brain catches up and the pain is there, not in her stomach, just everywhere—hot and cold and too much too much…

Quinn lowers her to the ground, kneeling over her and looking the tiniest bit regretful as he plucks a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes off his hands and gun.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly, looking away. “But I have my orders too.”

Three footsteps. A door slams.

She’s alone with the pain.

She can breathe, but every breath feels like it’s a lungful of water. She can move, but every motion feels like a knife twisted in her stomach. Through blurring vision, she sees the door and pulls on every lingering fiber of strength she has to pull herself towards it.

Fitz. Simmons.
May.

She’s been here before—she’s brushed death with her fingertips, but that was different. That night when she had determinedly dragged a blade across her own wrist and watched the red life spill out, the responding darkness had been a slow drift, a welcome void. The pain she’d been carrying had receded, and everything was finally quiet…

But then May had been there. May had clamped the wound closed and called for help, and even though Skye had been furious to be dragged back into the world of feeling everything, everything that was awful and unfair and too much, too much…she had made it back.

Skye presses her hand against the life spilling out of her now, feeling the pull of that same darkness and fighting against it with everything she has left in her.

No…I don’t want…not this…

“Help me!” she gasps into the empty stairwell.

Help me!

She sags back against the door, choking against the warm liquid bubbling in her throat. Darkness clouds her vision, and she grasps at the light.

May will come…May will find you…I call and the universe answers…she’ll come…she’ll come…she’s always right on time…May…

May…

Chapter End Notes

Does anyone else ever wonder who does the shopping for all the team’s undercover outfits? Because I sure as hell do.

No promises for an update next weekend—but you all know what’s coming…
November 29, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 24

Simmons was safe on the train but also missing a couple of hours of her life, and Fitz is crawling out from under a car as they roll up to Quinn’s mansion with Ward leading the charge to take out the security detail out front.

Two kids accounted for…

“Where’s Skye?” Coulson demands as he, May, and Simmons stride up to the house.

Fitz’s hand is shaking as he points at the mansion. “She didn’t want to let Quinn get away.”

May’s heart threatens to speed up, and she tramps it down.

She wouldn’t have been that stupid…

Ward has two night-night guns and makes short work of the security inside, and Coulson emerges from the back with his pistol pressed against Quinn’s temple. When he shoves the man down on the table in the entryway, she and Coulson see the spray of blood on his hands.

He wouldn’t have been that bold…

Coulson hauls him upright and presses the barrel of the gun under his chin.

“Where’s Skye?” he demands, absolute murder in his gaze.

Despite the threat pressed beneath his chin, Ian Quinn actually smirks. “You know, Agent Coulson, it’s dangerous to keep sending her in like that, all alone when she means so much to you…”

May’s heart skips several beats.

He wouldn’t have…

The gun leaves the man’s chin only for Coulson to crack the butt of it across the millionaire’s jaw. Quinn collapses onto the table, dazed, and Coulson looks at Ward and FitzSimmons.

“Search the house. Find her! Now!”

Ward immediately races down the hall as the scientists charge upstairs. Coulson surrenders Quinn’s wrist to May as she pulls out her handcuffs, and their eyes meet for the briefest moment.
Don’t even think it.

She’s not sure who is telling it to who.

Coulson races away as May cuffs the man’s hands behind his back, her mouth pulled tight as she sees that the blood on his skin has already dried.

She doesn’t let herself think it as she marches Quinn out to their SUV. Once he’s shackled and cuffed to the interior, she ices him directly in the heart before slamming and locking the doors and remote-disabling engine.

From outside, she still hears Coulson’s cry.

“SIMMONS! GET DOWN HERE!”

No…

She charges inside.

After the brightness of the sunset, the dimness of the back hallway is disorienting, and May nearly tumbles straight down the stairs as she sprints towards the sounds of her team. She hears the others in a room at the end of the hallway, the words drifting up the hall hitting her like bullets as she charges towards them.

“Keep her upright!”

“I’ve got no pulse!”

No no no no no no…

She rounds the corner and sees the worst.

Skye is motionless in Coulson’s arms, blood soaking her shirt and dried around her mouth.

“She’s lost too much blood!” Simmons is saying frantically as she crouches at Skye’s side and lifts the hem of her shirt, exposing two bullet wounds in the girl’s abdomen. But then the doctor’s eyes fall on the empty hyperbaric chamber, and Simmons orders them to load Skye into it.

May does her part of the lifting and tries not to think about how cold Skye’s skin feels.

Simmons and Fitz activate the pod and raise the pressure to lower Skye’s temperature while the rest of them hover uselessly around the pod. May looks at the amount of blood soaking Skye’s clothes, the trail of it across the floor, the pool beside the door and tries not to think it even though she knows this is too much…

“Is it working?” she gasps, watching Skye’s face, still with death.

She’s done this before. She shouldn’t be doing this again.

Skye! Stay with me!

Coulson asks it again, louder.

“Is it working?!”

None of them are breathing.
But then Skye’s lips part, a puff of warm air escaping her lungs, frosting on the glass above her.

Simmons looks up at them with blood-soaked hands, not mincing words.

“For now.”

They somehow get the pod up the stairs and onto the plane. Simmons does not leave Skye’s side while Fitz gets it connected to a power source and Ward carries an unconscious Quinn to the Cage. Coulson calls ahead to the nearest SHIELD surgery facility and then calls for backup to come and clean up the mess of bodies in the foyer and arrest the re-frozen security team that had been “guarding” the place. She gets the plane in the air and points them towards the trauma center—thankfully only an hour away in Zurich—if they maintain their aircraft’s top speed.

By the time they hit cruising altitude and she makes it back down to the Lab where they’re all gathered, there is nothing left for anyone to do, and everything is horribly still.

As still as the girl in the pod.

Simmons’s voice is very level, even as she delivers the cold facts to the rest of them. The politeness does not falter, and May can tell it’s all that is allowing her to speak.

 “…If we don’t bring her back up to temperature soon, she could sustain permanent brain damage. We need to get her to a medical facility and fast. Until then, I’ll do everything I can to keep her alive.”

May stares at the chamber, a time capsule holding Skye in that fragile bubble between life and death. The girl’s skin is paler than May saw it that night ten years ago. That night, the surgery had been simple—close the leak and restore volume and blood pressure.

But May knows what bullets really do. Every agent who carries a gun is supposed to know exactly how they really kill if the heart doesn’t immediately stop from one shot.

Bullets are fast and forceful and unforgiving—they rip through tissues and closed systems and even burst bones into extra bullets. The danger is never just in the blood loss—it’s in everything that touches that isn’t supposed to touch other things. Fluid spreading into cavities, digestive systems seeping out onto everything else, organs losing their volume and collapsing on themselves, broken places pulling blood from extremities but splashing it uselessly into a leaking bucket…

Humans are all just bubbles made of bubbles. Poke them hard enough and they burst.

She looks up as Ward strides out of the Lab towards the vehicle bay, and she has a feeling she knows what’s about to happen.

She touches the door control so that the bulletproof glass will muffle the sound of the young man bringing his fist down on the hood of the SUV.

May steps up beside him as he shakes out his hand, chest heaving, seeming startled by the pain.

Adding it on the outside doesn’t diminish it on the inside.

Believe me. I would know.

“It’s not your fault,” she says forcefully. She touches his hand because she needs to feel something warm right now, something to drive away the memory of how cold Skye’s skin was...
“She never should have gone in there alone,” Ward rasps out, looking over at her.

May shakes her head, focusing on the task in front of her to forget about the one waiting behind two layers of glass. “Blaming yourself won’t help her.”

Ward doesn’t look away. “I’m not blaming myself.”

May looks away but doesn’t let go of his hand.

He doesn’t need to. I am.

A trauma team and a short-range ambulance are waiting as they land at Zurich’s SHIELD airfield. Simmons and Coulson ride with them into the facility while May and the boys follow them in on foot.

Coulson and Simmons meet them in the waiting room once Skye is safely into surgery.

“Go with May to wash up,” Coulson says in a voice like planks laid over a pit, nudging Simmons towards May with a meaningful look. Automatically, May reaches for her elbow and guides the girl towards a restroom even as the scientist protests.

“I cleaned up my hands on the plane…” but the girl falls silent as she catches sight of herself in the mirror. “Oh…” Her voice sounds thinner than ever.

You can try to wash off blood, May thinks as she tugs Simmons towards the sink and wets a paper towel to dab the haphazard smears of blood off Simmons’s cheek and neck and arms, but it’s never really gone.

Simmons is trying to talk, and May lets her, even as she avoids the girl’s gaze because they are begging for a reassurance, and May doesn’t have one.

I only know Skye’s past, not her future…I don’t know how this will end…

“She…SHIELD has excellent surgeons…”

May finds a still-damp patch of blood on Simmons’s sleeve and wets another paper towel, blotting at the darker stain on the dark fabric.

“Surgery will be complicated, probably require several hours of exploratory surgery to assess all her systems and see how she responds to a transfusion…”

May can only nod as she steps back and checks Simmons over a final time, falling back on the silence and stillness that is her own armor. She doesn’t know how she’s never noticed just how small this girl is…but maybe she’s only noticing it because the grand intelligence that always makes the scientist larger than life is suddenly out of its depth…useless in the face of fragile human anatomy…

“May?” Simmons asks, the desperate plea hidden inside a concerned inquiry, and May finally meets her eyes. She can tell that the girl has already cried once, where only Fitz could see.

“She’s still with us because of you, Simmons,” May says truthfully, curling her hand gently around the girl’s arm as she remembers the efficiency of the scientist’s orders in that wine cellar.

“She shouldn’t still be alive, May,” the girl scrapes out, looking away as her eyes fill with tears again. “There was so much blood…

“I saw it, too, Simmons,” May whispers, drawing the girl’s gaze back to hers. “And you know what
it was? It was a trail across the floor. She didn’t want to die. And that might be what she really needs to make it through this.”

Simmons purses her lips as the tears spill down her cheeks, and May presses another paper towel into the girl’s hand. Simmons takes it and buries her face in it, and when May lays a gentle hand on her arm again, the girl surprises her by walking right through it and curling down against May, a breaking thing against a broken thing. May wraps her arms carefully around the fragile girl, focusing on the task in front of her so that the gravity of everything outside that door can’t touch her.

The inevitable pain lurks like a deadly gas in the room, waiting.

November 30, 2013:

It’s been ten hours since they landed.

Ward is in the chair across from May’s, nursing a cup of hospital coffee. Fitz’s head is dropping on his chest on one end of the sofa while Simmons is curled into the other corner reading something on her tablet, probably medical reports of patients with similar injuries. Phil has finally stopped calling Fury’s unresponsive contact numbers and is pacing on the opposite side of the room. The blood on his shirt has dried into a dark stain.

May is holding herself here by holding herself very, very still. She’s afraid of what she’ll hear rattling if she moves too much.

When the surgeon finally emerges, her face is carefully blank.

They practically mob her, silent as ghosts.

“How is she?” Coulson asks, the echo back in his voice.

The woman’s face is grim. “Not good. The shots perforated her stomach and penetrated the large and small intestines. We resected what we could but there’s been too much damage.”

May glances at Simmons, and the girl’s reaction makes her stomach clench.

“So what’s next?” Coulson asks for all of them.

The doctor hesitates just enough that May knows what she’s about to hear.

“We can keep her comfortable,” the woman says, “but you need to make a decision as to whether you want to keep her on life support.”

No…

Coulson looks dumbstruck. “Are you saying there’s nothing that can be done?”

The doctor holds his gaze, not letting him misunderstand. “I’m saying you need to call her family. Get them here as soon as possible.”

May closes her eyes and forces herself to breathe.

“We’re her family,” she distantly hears Coulson say, as though through a mile of water.

“Then, in that case, I’m very sorry.”
She lands seven punches before Coulson stops her.

“May!” he shouts, and she looks up from Quinn’s broken, bloodied face, freezing with his blood smeared across her knuckles.

Ward is hovering behind Coulson in the doorway of the Cage. Her leader doesn’t seem at all surprised by the scene in front of him—he doesn’t even seem upset.

But he’s still in charge.

“Outside. Now,” he orders calmly, watching her until she releases the front of Quinn’s shirt and backs away, leaving him shuddering on the floor. She brushes past both men on their way out the door, stomping up the steps to Coulson’s office so fast that her head spins a little.

There’s been too much damage…

You’ll need to make a decision as to whether or not you want to keep her on life support…

“He deserves to die! Not her!” she says, too loud to her own ears, but loud enough to make it down the Coulson as he climbs the stairs behind her.

“Agreed,” her friend says, much too calmly, clearing the last few steps and gesturing with one hand for Ward to wait outside his office door, “but right now, Quinn doesn’t matter. Only Skye does. And I need you to pilot the plane.”

“You heard what the doctor said,” May exhales, turning towards Coulson.

You need to call her family. Get them here as soon as possible.

I’m very sorry.

Her head swims, and she pulls in a deep breath.

It feels like breathing water.

Oh no…

Her eyes fly to his, fear and pain crashing in all at once.

“Phil…” she gasps out as the world around her tilts.

Coulson spins around and slams the door on Grant Ward. She never sees him turn back around.

It’s pitch black in the room she appears in—for all of two seconds.

But then she hears the click of motion detector, and a single, white fluorescent light blinks on overhead.

“Oh no…” she gasps.

It’s a bathroom—a small, two-stall one with light green micro-tile on the walls and worn linoleum on the floor. She’s standing directly in front of a mirror, and May sees her own reflection, panicked, confused, and clothesless, blood running afresh from the wound in her shoulder.

She has no idea where she is. She has no idea when she is.
But as she leans against the sink, catching her breath as her balance zeroes, she suddenly hears the sound of another person stirring somewhere in the room.

“May?” a hoarse voice says.

Her hands tighten around the porcelain beneath them.

“Skye?” she gasps, a strangled, desperate sound.

She steps back from the sink and looks around the small room just in time to hear a lock slide and see the door of the handicapped stall swing open. On the floor, a teenage girl with braided-back hair and sleepy eyes sits back on her heels on top of a blanket, her face breaking into a smile.

“Hey!” the young woman says, happiness woven into tiredness.

May isn’t thinking, just moving across the floor in a single motion, falling to her knees and grabbing the girl into her arms. Skye makes a surprised sound, and May tries to relax her grip, but then Skye is hugging her back, laughing a little.

“Wow, this might be the most enthusiastic greeting I’ve gotten in years. What did I do to deserve this?” the girl’s slowly-brightening voice says beside her ear.

But May feels her composure crumbling, all the uncertainty of the last twenty-four hours crashing on her as she holds onto Skye, a Skye from somewhere before all this…safe and whole…

“Hey May, do you uh…want some clothes?” the girl says, loosening her grip a little.

“Oh god, I’m sorry,” May says automatically, releasing Skye and drawing back, wrapping her arms around herself for modesty.

But the girl only grins. “I mean, I’m not complaining…” Skye says, shuffling over to a knapsack on the floor beside her insubstantial bedroll. “Here,” she says, offering May an oversized flannel shirt from the top of the bag. May takes the garment and immediately pulls it on, trying to ignore the burning in her eyes.

But Skye doesn’t.

“What’s going on, May?” the girl asks, her tone different, and May focuses on the buttons under her fingers, focuses on getting this shirt appropriately buttoned even as her vision blurs…

“May?” Skye’s fingertips brush her knee, and May finally looks up, holding the grief tightly behind her lips.

The girl in front of her looks a couple of years older than the teenager May last saw in a hospital bed, but still a few years away from the girl May just left in a trauma center. The red highlights are gone, and her dark hair is braided back in a tight French braid. Skye is wearing several layers of day clothes that are variously too big, too old, or too young for her, but she does look far healthier and happier than the fourteen year-old she once was.

She also looks extremely concerned.

“May? Did something bad just happen to you?” the girl asks, her brows knitting together.

She’s worried about you, May realizes with a start. She has no idea…no idea…

It wrecks her.
May drops her face behind her hand as she feels the tears spill out, curling around herself like a burning leaf as she kneels on the ground. She tries to hold it in, to contain the implosion where it only touches herself, but Skye’s hands are on her pulling her in, and she’s suddenly in the girl’s arms.

“It’s okay…it’s okay…” Skye is whispering, holding her tightly against her chest, speaking against May’s hair. “Whatever you just left, I’m sorry…but it’s okay…you’re safe here…”

And May knows she should pull herself together and stop behaving like this; she knows that letting everything in is a crack in her armor that she can’t have right now…but she also knows that this is the only place she can let this out where no one can see it…well, no one who can talk anyways…

I’m sorry…I’m sorry…I’m sorry I wasn’t there to protect you...

She wraps her arms around Skye and doesn’t let go.

To her credit, Skye does not shrink back, no matter how long it all lasts. One hand holds her strong against her chest, the other is constantly smoothing carefully over May’s hair, a relaxing repetitive motion.

“It’s okay…” Skye keeps repeating in a reverent whisper. Strange words that have no real meaning but always seem to be offered in situations like this. “It’s okay…”

She has no idea...

By the time her tears subside, May feels like a rag wrung out, dried-out and achy. Skye is now sitting back against the bathroom wall, while May is curled on her side against her and more or less draped across her chest within the embrace.

“Here,” Skye says quietly, and May looks up to see her offering a bottle of water. May slowly sits up and takes it, managing to force her hands not to shake as she sips it carefully.

“Can you talk about it?” Skye asks quietly, and May turns to look at her, pivoting on the bedroll.

She looks at the girl in front of her, still years away from the trauma May just left but already on the other side of more hard days than any child should have accumulated at this age. She thinks again of the disaster that has sent her tumbling into this year of Skye’s life, and May feels all the impossible warnings pile up on her tongue.

She can’t believe it, though, when they actually spill out.

“I want to tell you to run, Skye. I want to tell you where to go, where to never go, what to never do, so that we never meet, that you never have the life I’ve seen. But I’ve tried to change the past before. I can join things, but I can’t change them. I want to tell you to stay as far away from the life I live as possible, Skye…but that’s not what happened. You’re going to meet me someday, Skye, and I’m going to wreck your life all over again.”

Skye looks overwhelmed by the deluge of words, and she sits motionless for a long moment, staring at May.

“Are you saying…are you saying you wish you never met me?” the girl finally asks, looking hurt.

May purses her lips against the tearful smile that presses out of her. “No, Skye…I’m saying that you deserve better than the life that knowing me is going to bring you. I wish you had the life you deserve.”
At these words, Skye actually rolls her eyes, looking away.

“Don’t be ridiculous, May,” the girl sighs. “Knowing what you and I are going to have someday is the only thing that’s kept me sane these past few years.”

The bathroom light suddenly clicks off again, plunging the room into darkness.

“Goddamn timer…” May hears Skye mutter, hears her shuffling across the floor and knocking the stall door open. The movement of the door seems to catch the motion detector's attention, and the light suddenly kicks back on.

“Where are we?” May finally remembers to ask as Skye sits back on the bedroll, looking amused.

“Still East Coast,” the girl answers, tucking her hands into her jacket pockets. “I’ve spent the last couple of weeks in North Carolina. It’s the cheapest place I’ve hit so far. And the warmest. Though bathrooms aren’t necessarily well-insulated…”

May feels her brow furrowing. “What are you sleeping in a bathroom for, anyway?” she asks. “And how old are you?”

Skye smirks. “Eighteen on my next birthday. It’s June 17, 2007, now. I got a head start on the whole ‘emancipation’ thing though, remember? Headed south—I’ve had enough of the cold. The library janitor has enough compassion in her that she’ll look the other way when I haven’t found anywhere else to crash for the night.”

May closes her eyes and pictures the list of dates that she has finally memorized.

“The next visit will be December 29,” she says. “This year.”

When she opens her eyes, Skye is staring at her shoulder.

“You’re bleeding,” the girl announces, and May looks down at the red stain on Skye’s shirt.

“Sorry,” she says quickly, tugging the material away from her skin. “I got it on you too…” she says apologetically, nodding at the place where her shoulder had pressed against Skye’s chest.

“It’s fine—I’ll throw it in with the wash next time I can afford a load,” the girl says, shrugging off her layers in order to strip off the shirt. As she does, May feels the warning tug in her stomach, followed quickly by the disappearance of her equilibrium.

“Skye…” May says, and the girl looks up, understanding.

“December 29,” Skye repeats, rising up on her knees and crowding into May’s space to wrap her in a hug.

“Don’t do anything stupid before then, okay?” May says against her shoulder, returning the embrace. You’ll do enough things like that later.

Her heart clenches again, and she feels the pain in her chest swell up in another sob. But against her chest, Skye laughs.

“If you and I are going to meet someday,” the girl says over her shoulder, “then I might as well juggle chainsaws—at least I know I’ll survive.”

And May wants to laugh with her, but she knows what she’s about to go back to, and she can’t quite
“You’re not bulletproof,” she says in a choked voice, and Skye pulls back.

“Neither are you, apparently,” the girl says, glancing at May’s shoulder before meeting her eyes again. “Whatever you’re going back to, promise me you won’t do anything stupid either, okay? I want you around for a long time too.”

May can’t manage a smile, but she nods. “I want that too.”

_I want that too._

“I’m going,” she warns as the world tips violently.

“Love you, May,” she hears the girl saying.

She’s not sure if she imagines lips brushing against her cheek.

The next thing she sees is the carpet on the floor of Coulson’s office.

“Incoming,” she hears her friend say before his suit jacket lands gently on her shoulders.

She keeps her head down as she draws the garment around herself, swallowing down against the persistent tears. She hears him kneeling in front of her, and when she finally lifts her head, she sees him set her pile of clothes between the two of them, nothing but concern in his eyes.

“You with me?” he asks gently, not reaching out to touch her.

She nods, though she has no idea how much she’s missed. “How long…” she croaks out.

“About thirty minutes,” he answers. “I’ve got FitzSimmons monitoring Skye’s transfer onto the Bus in a med-pod and Ward getting the plane ready for takeoff.”

“Is she still…”

“No change, for better or worse,” Coulson says, looking down. “You missed what I was going to tell you, though—I died too once, remember?” He meets her eyes again, and she nods, understanding. “There are doctors who did the impossible—they brought me back from the dead. I know that they’re out there, May. And if we get her there in time, I’m betting they can save Skye.”

She feels the fresh onslaught of tears and lowers her head again, because all of this at once is just _too much_…

“It might be our best hope,” she agrees. _It might be our only hope._

Her friend nods and climbs to his feet.

“Get dressed and get to the cockpit,” he says, moving to his office door. “We’re heading to Bethesda.”
November 30, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 24

They’ve been airborne and westbound for close to an hour when the cockpit door cracks and Ward climbs into the co-pilot’s chair.

“Hurt much?” he asks, nodding at her nearest hand.

She glances at the hand that had cracked across Quinn’s face, knuckles still red and aching, but she’s had worse.

“Fine,” she mutters, trying to make her voice as strong as it can be.

Ward seems hesitant to tell her the next thing. “Coulson told me how long he was dead. But you already knew that, didn’t you?”

Internally, May sighs.

Dammit, Phil…

“I saw Skye in the pod,” Ward goes on, and she wants to tell him to stop but also needs to hear anything she can about Skye, “machines filtering her blood, breathing for her.”

An hour ago I saw her young and whole and years away from all this…and nothing I do can keep her that way…

“I’m not sure I’d make this play,” Ward is saying, glancing over for her reaction. “Fly halfway around the world hoping for a second miracle?”

May thinks of the way she had tried to convince Coulson months ago to not let the girl join them on the plane.

He brought her here—he sees himself as the one responsible. He’ll move heaven and earth to make this right.

Not every agent would do that. Not every man would do that.

“People like us need people like him,” May says quietly.

In her periphery, Ward smirks a little. “I did like seeing you go after Quinn—you don’t open the blinds like that very often.”

May feels her mouth pull into an involuntary echo of a smile.

What’s inside isn’t for your hands to touch.
The radio suddenly crackles.

“SHIELD 616, this is Tower Michael Tango,” a Controller’s voice says in her ear. “You are in violation of SHIELD directive 1297—respond immediately.”

May looks over at Ward. What did I miss?

“Disobeying a direct order,” Ward says tiredly, shaking his head. “We didn’t hand Quinn over for interrogation.”

May glares out at the quinjets flanking them on both sides.

Great.

She briefly considers radioing up to Coulson for his orders, but then she realizes that given the state of the patient in the cargo level, they’re in no position to attempt evasive maneuvers.

She flips the switch on her radio and responds to the tower.

“This is SHIELD 616—how do we proceed?”

A third jet appears on their radar. “Prepare to be boarded and relinquish command.”

Ward stands up without another word and strides out. She locks the door after him because 1: if someone wants to take command of this plane, they’re going to have to at least work for it, unlike the last time, and 2: she doesn’t need anyone to walk in on her listening through her bugs in Coulson’s office.

She hears Agent Garrett (well, well, long time no see), and Agent Triplett enter from the quinjet with orders to secure the prisoner, hears Garrett explaining to Coulson that he’s been chasing Quinn too and already lost three of his own agents in the process “And your little opp in Italy yesterday cost my team months of work.”

Oh for god’s sake, Garrett, do you even know what happened yesterday?

She hears Ward start a fight when Triplett won’t be delayed in securing Quinn, but then she hears the senior agents interrupt with new orders.

“Saving the girl is top priority,” Garrett says agreeably. “And she might know something.”

They’re halfway between Europe and North America when Simmons calls May to the Lab.

As she walks in, she sees Coulson’s Level 10-classified file spread out on the table, but both the scientists look utterly bewildered.

“Bad news— Dr. Strayton’s gone off the grid.”

Strayton. The head surgeon. Well, it’s not the worst that could have happened…

“So we’ll find a different doctor who operated on Coulson,” May says automatically, forgetting to pretend like she hasn’t seen the file before. “Do I need to change our destination?”

“That’s just it,” Simmons says, looking back down at her computer. “Coulson was never treated in Bethesda—the doctors listed, the operating room numbers—none of them exist! None of them are a part of SHIELD.”
She thinks of the part of the file that Coulson still doesn’t know about and tries to decide what she can reveal.

*Nothing. Fury’s orders come first.*

She falls back on protocol.

“Let’s go and talk to Coulson.”

“Quinn said that he shot Skye because the Clairvoyant told him to,” Coulson says once they’re all together in his office. “He said the Clairvoyant can see everything except how I was brought back to life, and shooting my agent was the best way to force my hand.”

“Well, he shot Skye for nothing then,” May snaps, her hand tightening around the file. “The place where we’re going, the doctors who treated you? They don’t exist.”

“Or maybe they exist somewhere else,” Coulson suggests. “This is SHIELD—there are always secrets.”

“Even if we do find where you were treated and they were able to replicate the procedure, there’s the other obvious question,” May makes herself say.

“Which is?” he prompts them, impatience edging into his voice as he stares them down.

May can’t say it, so Simmons says it for her. “Whether we should.”

Coulson looks appalled, and Simmons immediately attempts to explain.

“What you experienced sir, if this file is even partially accurate…”

“Nobody is suggesting that we submit Skye to everything I went through,” Coulson interrupts, “but if there’s something in here—a drug, a treatment that can save her—we need to find it. Figure it out.”

“Yes sir,” Simmons says calmly, accepting another order to do the impossible, and leaves without another word.

May looks over at the wall monitor with the feed from Skye’s med-pod. She thinks of the threads barely holding the girl’s body together as she feels Coulson looks over at her.

“You disagree,” he says quietly.

*You would too if you knew what I know.*

*You wouldn’t want this for her, no matter how painful the alternative.*

*And you wouldn’t want to give this truth up to anyone, especially to the one who wanted her dead.*

She exhales and does her best to answer calmly as she faces him again. “No. I think we need to do everything humanly possible to save Skye. But we need to acknowledge that doing so might give the Clairvoyant exactly what he wants.”

He nods, resigned. “That’s a risk we have to take.”

They stand in silence for a long moment, each lost in their own impossible thoughts.

“You okay?” she finally hears him ask, and she looks over at him through the swirling chaos.
“I’m handling it,” she answers tightly. “Are you?”

He holds her gaze, and she can feel him embracing her without touching her.

“Stay with us, May,” he says unnecessarily as she turns to go. “Do whatever you need to do to keep yourself here.”

It’s permission to go lock herself in the cockpit again, to take a moment to get her head on straight and center herself in the present…but May can’t make herself do it. Once she’s got the door locked behind her, she sinks down on the floor against the door, curling over her folded legs and letting the images come.

_A hopeful nine-year-old, still believing in tomorrow for a better life._

_A frustrated twelve-year-old, her optimism already wearing thin._

_A despairing fourteen-year-old, out of patience and out of ideas, all but one._

_A repaired seventeen-year-old, out on her own, taking life into her own hands in a different way. Carving her own path, impatient and unapologetic, to the places she wanted to be._

May closes her eyes and breathes through the miles until Coulson calls into the cockpit with new coordinates and she curses as she swings the plane into a 180 bank, thankful for the fuel capacity of the plane. FitzSimmons have done the impossible again, and they’re heading to Algeria.

May sets their course and prays to a God she doesn’t believe in for one more miracle today.

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**December 1, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 24**

Coulson is in the co-pilot’s chair beside her when they land on cliffs that run up against the sea.

There has been no response on any channel from anyone inside, and they’ve already agreed on the plan.

Garrett will go in with Ward and Coulson while Simmons and May stay with Skye and get her ready to move at a moment’s notice. In the event that no one is there (or no one inside is willing to help), Fitz will be inside with the men to collect anything that Simmons might be able to use.

“The Guest House is not a SHIELD facility,” Coulson reminds them all in the cargo bay as the others load their weapons. “We don’t know who or what’s in there. Be prepared for initial resistance.”

Garrett decides to leave Agent Triplett with them—“He’s had MedTech training”—and the four other men march off the plane and straight up to the entrance of the underground facility, leaving May with a doctor, a Specialist, and their not-even-agent who is barely hanging on by a thread.

May can’t decide where she wants to be—inside looking for the cure, at Skye’s bedside, in the cockpit where she feels capable but is ultimately useless—so she just remains in the cargo bay, between all of those places, watching until her team disappears into the mountain.

Somewhat unsurprisingly, the comms go down once the men get underground. May crouches down and wraps her arms around her legs, waiting, listening, watching. When her team doesn’t immediately come running back out, she decides to believe in the better possibility even as she prepares herself for the worst.
If the alien host isn’t here, then most likely there’s no drug here, which means that Skye…

She cuts the thought off and squints into the Mediterranean sun until her eyes burn for a reason other than the overwhelming fear gripping her heart.

After fifteen minutes of radio silence, she rises to her feet and lets the blood flow smoothly through her legs again. Her head spins a little, and she waits until her balance returns before moving up the ramp and back into the dimness of the cargo level, where she sees Triplett and Simmons turning from the window of Skye’s pod.

“Comms are down,” she announces. “If we don’t hear anything within the hour, I’m going after them.”

You’re in charge of Skye, but I’m in charge of this team.

Simmons nods, understanding.

But suddenly the monitors burst into a frenzy of warning beeps, and May looks up in time to see Skye’s body bowing off the bed, her limbs and spine rigid as she seizes in arrest.

“Skye’s coding!” Simmons shouts, panic in every syllable. “Both of you, now!”

“How can we help?!” May hears her own ragged voice demanding as the three of them rush into the pod.

“I need a unit of epi!” Simmons calls, leveling Skye’s bed and beginning chest compressions.

“Got it!” Triplett is already injecting a dose into the girl’s abdomen.

May hovers uselessly at the foot of the bed, unable to look away as Simmons presses again and again on Skye’s chest, doing her heart’s job for her and forcing the muscle to keep the blood flowing through her system.

Come on Skye, come on…stay with us…

It takes less than a minute for the epinephrine to reach the girl’s heart and race through her system, and Jemma’s hands work in an unfaltering rhythm until Skye’s heart seems to restart like a tired engine and the sounds of the monitors return to a less terrifying cadence. Even after Skye’s body relaxes back into the bed, Simmons doesn’t move her hands away, as though she’s afraid to disturb the delicate equilibrium they’ve accomplished.

“Weak, erratic heart rate,” the doctor says, watching the monitors. “Each time we save her, I ask myself—is this what Skye would want?”

May stares at the girl that she once prevented from taking her own life, thinks of the trail of blood she saw on the floor of that wine cellar, the proof that this girl was no longer interested in giving up, and is surprised by how tight her chest feels when she tries to speak.

“We didn’t come this far to quit.”

Suddenly the comms crackle on through the plane’s PA system. Through static and squeaking, she discerns Fitz’s voice, and May’s heart rate spikes further from its not-at-all-resting rate.

Simmons’s face washes with relief. “They’re alive! Maybe we can—”

But suddenly the monitors are a cacophony of warning beeps again as Skye’s body seizes once more
“Fitz, what’s your status?” she demands loudly towards the intercom in the hall, pivoting towards the
door to run out and meet the engineer that is hopefully running back up with the only thing May
knows that could save this girl’s life now…

And suddenly, she’s not there.

December 1, 2013: May is 44 and 44, Skye is 24

Melinda recognizes the carpet of the cockpit as soon as she opens her eyes.

The engines are quiet and she’s alone, which is the most important thing for the moment, but she
reflexively sits up and kicks the cockpit door closed. Her head spins from the sudden movement, but
she’s not snapping back to her present, so she grumbles and shifts off the floor onto her hands and
knees.

One night of sleep…one fucking night of uninterrupted sleep…is that too much to ask?

Daylight is streaming through the windshield, which tells her that the Bus is not parked in their
underground hangar at the moment, so she hides behind the pilot’s chair as she pulls herself upright,
peering through the glass.

On one side of the vista before her, a stretch of turquoise that she immediately recognizes as the
Mediterranean runs all the way to the horizon. Melinda looks to the other side and sees golden cliffs,
an entrance dug right in front of them…

Algeria. The Guesthouse.

“Oh shit…”

She leaps into action and wrenches the cabinet door open, grabbing her clothes and yanking them on
in record time. She throws the cockpit door open and tears barefoot through the cabin towards the
cargo stairs, praying that she’s not too late to something that has technically already happened…

As she races down the stairs to the cargo level, she sees Simmons and Trip in the med pod with
Skye, the former doing chest compressions on the dying girl in the bed. She hears feet pounding over
the metal floor in the cargo bay and then Fitz is running in (Oh god, Fitz, look at you…), his face
awash with panic.

“There’s a suicide stopwatch rigging the base!” he shouts towards her as he races up to the pod. “I
don’t think there’s much time left on it!”

And then there’s Ward (Oh god…Ward…) sprinting up the steps behind Fitz, his gaze zeroing on
May even as they both reach the pod at the same time.

“Get us off the ground or it’s going to fall out from under us!” he orders in a tone that seems laced
with genuine fear, and May remembers what part of this story she hasn’t actually done before.


She races back to the cockpit and prepares for a record-setting vertical takeoff, hearing the
confirming shouts from Coulson as he races back into the range of the plane’s comms.
She leaves the cargo door open until they’re already ten feet off the ground, knowing that they must be safely on by then, but she still feels the shockwaves as the base beneath them goes up in flames and the mountain goes down on top of it in a heap of rock and earth.

Her hands are shaking when she finally releases the yoke to set their plane on a course for Sicily. Once she has them safely on autopilot, she rushes back down to the med pod, pausing only to grab a spare jacket and shoes from her room and pull them hastily on.

She knows how this will end, but she missed this part before…

Coulson must have just told Simmons not to give Skye the GH-325 injection, but the doctor is already setting aside an empty syringe.

“I was losing her anyway—what harm could it do?” Simmons is saying, her tone resigned.

May presses through the mass of bodies surrounding Skye’s bed in time to see the girl’s heart rate jump from 20 to 60, and for a moment, they all relax. Then Skye’s body is suddenly arching off the bed, her breath barely squeezing through a closing windpipe as her pulse more than triples in a single instant…

“She’s spiking!” May shouts, panic flooding in automatically, even as she tells herself that it’s unneeded…

“What’s happening?” Coulson demands, and Simmons is wordless, her hands hovering over Skye’s convulsing body, out of ideas. The others are panicking, shouting at Simmons and Coulson and Skye…

*It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay,* May tells herself because she can’t tell anyone else, though she does not even need to fake her horror as she watches the girl she loves swing too, too close to death once again.

*It’s okay, she lives through this, it’s okay, it’s okay…*

And just as suddenly, Skye’s body relaxes, collapsing onto the bed, her heartbeat returning to a normal resting right almost instantly.

“She’s stabilizing,” Simmons breathes, watching the monitors disbelievingly.

“Simmons?” Coulson asks, and the girl nods, her face breaking into a nervous smile as her eyes shift onto May. Her brow furrows, and May follows the doctor’s gaze down to the scattering of black clothing beneath everyone’s feet…

Simmons meets May’s eyes again, bewildered. With her gaze, May warns her to say nothing.

*That comes later.*

“Can someone tell me what we just saw?” Ward demands over her shoulder, and May feels herself bristle automatically at the sound of his voice.

“Girl’s a fighter,” Trip says at Simmons’ elbow. “What was that stuff you just gave her?”

May watches the silent exchange of looks between Simmons and Coulson.

*There it is, the beginning of the unraveling…*

Simmons turns away from them all, her hand methodically smoothing back Skye’s hair.
“I don’t know. All I know is that it worked.”

May feels the knots in her own chest loosening, but Coulson is still a tightly-wound spring beside her.

“You did it,” May says quietly, and he turns towards her, still dazed. She sees the moment that he realizes that her hair is the wrong length and the wounds that she would have had on her face this morning are gone, and she tugs his shirt cuff in a subtle warning—be cool. But all she sees on his face is the haunted look that she now knows followed his discovery of the alien host in the base, the uncertainty, the fear…and he is stumbling away from them without saying another word.

She backs into the hallway with Garrett, fighting down against her gag reflex at the sight of him, and turns to the older man.

“Did something happen down there?” she mutters, even though she already knows.

The man shakes his head. “I’m not sure. One minute he was fine, the next it was like he’d seen a ghost.”

You lying bastard…you son of a bitch…how dare you act concerned about anyone except yourself…May clenches and unclenches a fist behind her back, forcing her expression to remain appropriately bewildered.

I could put a knife between his ribs right now…forget testifying…he doesn’t deserve it…just snap his neck…and then put a bullet in Ward…

But she knows she can’t. That’s not what happens.

Not yet.

Garrett and Trip head back upstairs to leave with Quinn on their jet. May stays in the cargo level, watching the clock while Fitz takes the empty syringe to the lab in order to start running tests on any trace amounts of the serum left inside. Simmons remains, unmoving, at Skye’s side, and May eventually steps up beside Ward, the two of them standing outside the pod May knows he will later eject into the ocean with their scientists inside.

Even though she knows it’s impossible, she tries to say something.

“You don’t have to do what Garrett tells you anymore. You can choose what kind of man to be. And you’d better choose now before it’s too late…”

“If you kill one more innocent person, none of us will ever forgive you, and the path we’ll all end on will be so far from where we began that no one would even recognize this man you once tried to be…”

“I know who you are, Ward. Who you really are. I know…I know…I know…”

But, just like every time she tries to tell someone a warning about the future, the words jam in her throat, and her tongue is frozen, immobile behind her lips.

You can’t stop it, Melinda. That’s how it has to happen.

She checks the clock again.

It’s almost time.
She looks over at Ward and catches the concern in his eyes as he looks at Skye, just before the mask drops back in place as he glances over at her.

*She isn’t yours,* she thinks at him, still fighting the urge to break every bone in his body. *Neither of us will ever deserve her, but she isn’t yours, and she never will be.*

But May knows how to wear masks too. She swallows down against the hate and disgust and forces her voice to sound neutral.

“Could you give me a minute with Simmons?” she asks quietly. “Wouldn’t be a bad idea to go check on the plane while the quinjet detaches.”

He nods once, his eyes dark, and May waits until he has rounded the corner down the hall and she hears him ascending the stairs in the cargo bay before she also moves. She fetches a spare sheet from the cabinet outside the med pod and slips inside with Simmons, picking up the pile of clothes from the floor and closing the door.

“You have a few new secrets to keep now,” she says calmly as she hangs the folded sheet over the foot of Skye’s bed, and Simmons looks up at her sharply, looking for all the world like a child who is certain they’re about to get scolded but wants to try to delay it as long as possible.

“I—I don’t know what you’re—” the girl starts to stammer, but May cuts her off, nodding towards the pile of empty clothes in her arms.

“Time travel.”

She says it quietly enough that she knows that the camera won’t pick it up, and Simmons has an expected reaction: none whatsoever. The girl only blinks at her.

“What?”

May sets the clothes on the foot of Skye’s bed, stepping around to stand opposite Simmons as she picks up the sheet and shakes it out, clutching it in her hands and taking a deep breath.

*Here we go.*

“I’m a time-traveler, Simmons,” she repeats calmly, her eyes firm on the girl’s, her voice still low. “You’re wondering why you might have imagined that you saw me disappear a few minutes ago when Skye was coding a second time—it’s because you did see that. Ever since Bahrain, it’s been a regular occurrence—I don’t know how, or why, but I will vanish from where I am and reappear in another time and place. And that’s what you saw today. The present-day May disappeared when Skye was coding. I’m from the future though—I was asleep in my bed in July of next year, but I had a nightmare and woke up here. Sometimes, visits like this line up, and I travel from the future to fill in a gap that I missed the first time around, but it’s not a regular occurrence. It sure was lucky today, though.” May’s eyes flick towards Skye, still unconscious between them. "But anyway…that’s the short answer, Simmons—one more impossible thing that you’ll come to accept before too long—but for now you have to keep it a secret.”

Simmons is holding her gaze, and May can practically see the wheels turning.

*She’s trying to decide if you’re just screwing with her, but the May she knows would never say something so ridiculous if it wasn’t true…*

May tugs aside the neck of her own T-shirt and lets the scientist see the scar stretched over the space below her left collarbone.
“Later, you should ask the May in front of you to show you her shoulder. This wound will look brand new, because it is for her. For me, though, the mission on the Italian train was seven months ago. That much time makes a world of difference for scar tissue.”

Simmons’s brow furrows, and she finally raises her hands exasperatedly.

“Agent May, I’m not sure what you’re saying or why you think I’d believe it, but time travel is—“

“Simmons,” May interrupts because she hates hearing that excuse from anyone in SHIELD, “Coulson was stabbed through the heart and was brought back to life. You were infected with a disease transmitted through electric shock. Ward went nuts after touching a supposedly-mythical staff. Our plane was attacked by a dimension-hopping ghost. And now a miracle drug just brought Skye back from certain death. What’s impossible?”

The girl continues to stare at her in baffled silence, though, and May sighs, falling back on her trump card as she checks the pod’s clock again.

“Look, I am fully aware of how crazy this sounds. But in about ten seconds, there’s going to be a second me on the floor of this pod—the present-day me, who will be returning from her mother’s home in Philadelphia in the year 1998. She’s the one you can ask all the follow-up questions.”

Simmons glances around the pod quickly. “Agent May, do you really expect me to—“

“Three, two, one,” May counts down quickly, just as there is a small burst of air and another woman tumbles to the ground at her feet. May immediately drops the sheet around the woman’s shoulders, kneeling beside her shaking self.

“Hey, Meimei,” she says loud enough for Simmons to hear as she touches her own shoulder. “Skye’s alive. Everyone’s all right,” she reassures the other woman immediately. “Simmons is here, though, and I just told her the truth.”

Her younger self is still gasping as she looks up and looks around, taking in Skye’s heartbeat on the monitors and Simmons standing with both hands over her mouth as she stares at the two of them kneeling on the floor of the med pod, just out of sight of the camera in the corner.

“Thank God,” her younger self whispers in a voice that echoes with relief, biting her lip as her eyes continue to dart around at them. May grabs the pile of clothes off the bed and pushes them into the other woman’s hands. The other Melinda accepts them and visibly rouses herself to put them on, letting the sheet hang around herself as she pulls on her shirt and jeans.

“Everyone’s fine. You’re fine,” May repeats as she stays kneeling beside the other woman and loosely closes the sheet around her for modesty. “I’ve got the Bus on a course for Sicily now—you guys need fuel before you head back to the States.”

The other Melinda is shaking her head as she pulls on her jacket again, meeting May’s eyes. “It’s not just the team—I… I was afraid that I’d go back to the desert…”

Oh, that’s right.

Now May remembers—the panicked minutes she had spent racing through her mother’s empty house, waiting without breathing for time to reverse and tank her back, frantically thinking of the dying girl coding in a hospital bed, the teammates she had left fighting their way out of a possible hostile situation…

But now, months away from this event and with that horror now such a distant memory, she shakes
her head, nodding towards Skye, still motionless in the bed beside them. “No. Not when this one’s here. She’s your fixed point, remember?” she says, her heart swelling even as she looks at the girl.

_The star in the darkness, holding onto you. The fixed point that you’ll always come back to._

Now dressed enough to stand up without arousing suspicion from anyone watching the monitors, the younger Melinda picks up her shoes and rises to her feet, finally facing Simmons.

The scientist has barely moved, her gaze darting repeatedly between the two women across from her, and May can’t help but smile even as she remains crouching on the floor behind the bed and grins at Simmons, an action that seems equally disarming to the scientist.

_It’s not every day that I get to have entertaining moments like this, _she rationalizes to herself. _Enjoy it when you can._

_But business first._

“I’m sure that you have questions, Simmons,” she says seriously, holding the girl’s gaze, even as she sees her younger self glanced over, alarmed, “but I am last priority right now. You can ask me anything, we can try to understand this better together…as long as it waits until after this Clairvoyant business is settled. No one else needs to be an intel risk right now.”

She can feel her hands tingling. Time is almost up.

“Sorry to give you one more secret to keep,” she says sincerely, glancing over at Skye even as she says it. She looks up at her older self, who is staring at the girl, that blend of emotions that she will spend a lot of time calling _concern_ and _compassion_ clear and present in her eyes.

“And you, Meimei,” she says, poking herself hard on the calf even as she feels her equilibrium fading, “stop wasting time.”

It’s the best she can do.

The world turns over, and she’s gone.

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**December 1, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 24**

Simmons, to her credit, does not try to talk about it.

The girl busies herself with Skye and sends May to bring Fitz to the pod, and May listens while they fill each other in on what happened in the base and what happened on the plane. She hears about a suicide-rigged lab that was definitely not a medical center, a drug labeled GH-325 that was found in a cooler and injected into Skye (it was the only way to save her life—you can cross that new, terrifying bridge when you come to it), Skye’s multiple codings and the confusing way that Coulson ran in shouting to not give the drug to Skye (oh no…what did he see?). Simmons does not mention May disappearing. She doesn’t mention seeing two women in this room only minutes ago.

Eventually, May remembers that they’re on a very short course to Sicily and takes her own leave.

She can feel the girl watching her on her way out, but when she glances back, Simmons looks away.

Night has settled firmly over the sea when they land to refuel at the biggest airfield on the island nation. While they wait, she finds Coulson up in his office, sitting catatonic at his desk. He barely reacts as she walks in, but she can see him analyzing her appearance and identifying her as the present-day version of herself.
“The other you?” he asks, his brow lifting.

May shakes her head, sliding his office door shut. “She’s gone back.”

“When did you disappear?” he asks, not moving from behind his desk.

May’s heart feels cold as she remembers. “When Skye started coding a second time.”

She seats herself at his desk and waits for him to tell her something, anything to help her gauge how he’s reacting to what he might have learned in the Guesthouse, but when he just stares past her in silence, she realizes that she’s going to have to snap him out of it.

“Simmons knows,” she says quietly, and his gaze snaps over to hers. “I told her everything. Well, the ‘future me’ told her.”

She picks up the tablet on his desk and pulls up the video feed from Skye’s pod, rolling it back to thirty minutes ago.

4:23 pm local time, she memorizes before deleting it. *Guess it’s what I’ll need to know for next time I do this.*

“How did she take it?” Coulson finally asks as she rolls the video back to check the moment she disappeared in the first place. She was off camera, so she doesn’t need to delete it. She closes the tablet though rather than watch Skye coding in the bed once again.

“I don’t think we need to worry about her,” she says honestly, setting the tablet aside and letting her gaze settle back on him. “The other me told her to make me last priority until the Clairvoyant is taken care of. I do think we can trust her though—she’s always been good at following orders.”

Coulson nods, seeming to drift away again, and May brings him back to the reason she’s here.

“You did the impossible today. You saved Skye’s life. Why aren’t you happy about it?”

He is silent, so she carefully presses further.

“They told me you were yelling to not use the drug on Skye. What made you change your mind?”

She watches the haunted look soak further into his features, and dread seeps cold through her chest.

“Being down there?” he finally says slowly. “Seeing where I came from? I just got really scared that she would suffer the way that I did.”

May nods, keeping the careful mask in place even as the cold in her chest rises higher.

*He knows. You need to wait for confirmation, but he knows.*

“You did the right thing, Phil,” she attempts. “You saved her life.”

He looks away, shaking his head.

“Time will tell,” he says quietly.

She nods back.

*Time will tell.*
Watch and see what he does.

She drifts back downstairs and stands alone in the darkness for a moment.

You could go sit with Skye.

You could go talk to Simmons.

You could even go back up there and stay with Phil until he at least attempts to act like himself.

Or…

Ward presses her against the door once it’s shut and locked behind her.

“I told him we never did it on the Bus…” he mutters, grunting as she yanks his belt open and shoves his pants impatiently down his hips.

“That was certainly true when you said it,” she whispers back, letting him take care of her own jeans before lifting her onto his desk.

The kiss she pulls him into feels like exactly what they let it be—something they’re both doing instead of feeling something else. She doesn’t let go when he pulls back, though. She makes him lift her with her arms around his neck until she ends up against the wall again as he presses her between the equally unyielding planes of his body, thrusting into her until they’re both gasping shuddering over one another’s shoulders.

She doesn’t miss that he doesn’t look her in the eye even after he pulls back, even after they separate. It doesn’t surprise her—it only confirms what she’s suspected since he nearly broke his hand on the hood of the SUV yesterday.

She wonders if he’s aware just how obvious he is.
Another Interlude of Skye’s memories that our May hasn't gotten to yet. I’m planning to have one more chapter like this after a few more plotty chapters. Enjoy the break. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

April 22, 1998: May is 45, Skye is 8

The girl flings herself at her as soon as she appears.

“May!”

May only has time to see that Skye is still a tiny bundle of brown hair and skinny limbs, but she’s large enough now that she effectively tips May over when the girl collides with her kneeling body.

“Oof! Hey kiddo,” the woman responds as her back thumps into a dresser as Skye lands on her, scrambling onto her lap and pressing herself to May’s body beneath her chin. “Good to see you too.”

Skye’s grip around her is as tight as a child can make it, and May indulges the girl for as long as she feels comfortable before falling back on propriety.

“I’ll hold you as long as you want, sweetheart,” she finally says towards the top of Skye’s head, “but you’ve got to let me put some clothes on first.”

_I know you’re not quite old enough to care yet, but this situation is weird enough as it is…_

It takes Skye a long moment to respond, but she finally nods against May’s shoulder.

“Ohay,” she murmurs, drawing back and moving towards the bed. May sees that this room is, for once, a one-person room, and a clean one at that. A double bed is pressed into one corner, the bedding striped bright blue, white, and yellow and neatly made. The walls are clean and white with a few framed pressed flowers hung on them, and there are toys carefully arranged into labeled bins in a cubby shelf on one wall.

“Where are you living now?” May asks as Skye digs into her ever-present duffle, the only thing she seems to bring with her between houses.

“Somewhere in Alabama,” the girl answers, extracting the now-familiar shirt and shorts and bringing them to May. Pulling the shirt over her head and wordlessly gesturing for Skye to look away as she shimmies into the shorts, May finds her lap once again full as soon as she settles back down on the floor.

“You must be eight or nine by now…” May says as she wraps her arms around the girl and hugs her to her chest. “It won’t be much longer before you’re too tall to hold like this.”

“Eight,” the girl answers against her chest, snuggling closer. “And a half. I’m almost done with second grade.”
“And how long have you been living here?” May asks towards the top of Skye’s head.

“Since Christmas.”

*Oh, that’s just horrible. Who moves a kid right after Christmas?*

“What do you think of this place?” she asks next, expecting a pleased response as she glances around the best bedroom that she’s ever seen Skye in.

Under her chin, however, the girl is silent.

“Mary?” May tries to nudge her back in order to look at her face, but Skye just holds on tighter, a small shudder fluttering through her limbs.

“I *don’t like it here,/* she girl finally whispers against her chest.

May feels fury flicker inside her ribs, the same emotion that always springs readily to life every time she learns about someone else who hurt Skye in her past.

“Is it the family?” she asks, even as Skye keeps her head bowed. “The teacher? Other kids?”

She does her best to not let the emotion seep into her voice.

*Don’t scare her. It’s not her you’re angry at.*

Against her chest, Skye only shakes her head and burrows further into her embrace. “I don’t want to talk about it,” she murmurs, sounding much too old for her age.

“Okay,” May whispers, and tightens her embrace, the best she can do against the enemies she can’t be around to stop.

Skye is quiet and still in her arms for several minutes, long enough that May wonders if she has been hugged—or even touched—since the last time May visited her. She hasn’t been to the visit preceding this one yet, so she’s not sure what to follow up with.

*Hopefully, things haven’t been as bad as they sound.*

When Skye finally lifts her head and looks up at May, her dark eyes are somber.

“Can we just read books in here today?” the girl asks, a thread of uncertainty in her voice. “I want to go out and play, but Janet is working at home today, and she wants us to be quiet when she’s working.”

May nods and smiles gently at her. “We can do whatever you want. What book do you want to read first?”

One of the cubbies in the shelf is full of books, and as Skye stands up to select one, May considers the clean but uncomfortable hardwood floor they’ve been sitting on.

“Could we go sit on your bed?” she suggests when Skye turns back towards her, a book in hand. “It will be more comfortable for both of us.”

Skye’s eyes flick nervously towards the bed. “We can, but you’ll need to help me smooth out the comforter before you leave. Janet…” Skye bites her lip, searching for the words.

“…Is a neat freak?” May suggests, and Skye looks back, not even trying to smile back.
“She’s scary when she’s not happy. And she’s not happy…a lot.”

It’s only then that May notices the fingerprint-sized bruises on the little girl’s arm.

The fury in her chest flares again, and as Skye turns to climb bravely onto the bed, May quickly stops her.

“It’s okay. We’ll stay on the floor. Come back over here.”

The relief in Skye’s eyes as she turns from the bed and throws herself against May again is utterly heartbreaking. May wraps the girl in her arms once more and soaks it all in—the pain that hasn’t resolved itself into anger yet; the fear that Skye will soon learn how to mask; the desperation for love that she will box up like an embarrassing heirloom that she’s ashamed to keep but more ashamed to discard…

May wishes she could absorb it all into herself and lighten Skye’s load for the heavy years ahead, but she can’t. She can only try to balance the scales with any good memories she can provide.

Skye settles down beside her, her head resting on May’s shoulder, and sets the book on the woman’s thigh.

“What have we got today?” May asks, picking up the short chapter book and examining the cover.

*Matilda*, by Roald Dahl.

“You know, I’ve never read this one…” she says cheerfully, trying to draw some excitement out of the girl beside her.

“I saw part of the movie back at the Meyers’ house last year,” Skye says quietly at her shoulder. “Janet already had the book in this room when I got here, so I wanted to hear the whole story. I know it’s long, but maybe you could help me get started…”

“Absolutely,” May says, opening the paperback to chapter one. “Let’s see…”

May spends the next two hours reading aloud about a family that doesn’t deserve the daughter they got: a daughter far smarter and more moral than anyone gives her credit for, or even notices. She reads about a school of scared children with an evil headmistress, a home with a dishonest father and a bullying brother…a little girl using the powers she discovers that she has to right the wrongs around her…

But it’s only when she sees the seven-year-old legally emancipate herself from her parents and sign herself into the custody of her teacher, the only adult who ever actually cared for her, that it finally occurs to May that this *might* not be a story that Skye needed to hear.

“Hey Mary,” she finally says quietly, “you know this is just a story, right?”

She does her best to never lie to Skye, but knowing what she knows now, this one is going to be tricky.

“I mean, maybe there are people out there with gifts who can do things like this, and they really should use those powers to do good, but I mean…the family. Good parents would never treat a daughter like that, and most parents are…”

*Most parents are good?*
But May can’t make herself say it when Skye has no reason to believe that.

May tries again. “Most parents…”

...Love their children. ...Want their children. ...Would never agree so easily to give them up.

Skye is quiet beside her, and May shifts slightly, the leg beneath the girl’s elbow tingling with pins and needles, asleep for far too long. She looks over at the girl, whose eyes are fixed on the cover of the book in front of them as she finishes the sentence for May in a tiny whisper.

“Most parents love their children.”

The rest of the sentence echoes in the silence that follows.

Just not the ones I know.

It’s true, and there’s nothing May can say here to make that truth hurt any less.

“How do we only find death following her?"

Even if she can’t tell Skye the truth, there are some comforts May can give.

“I can’t tell you about your parents, Mary,” she says slowly, “but I can promise you that there is a family in your future, and it’s coming before you ever meet any family related to you by blood. It will be a family that you choose, just like this little girl.” She points at the paperback resting on her leg.

Skye stares at her, her eyes filling with tears, her lip pushing out. “Where? When? How long until I find them?”

May smiles and pulls the girl gently closer, and Skye settles willingly against her chest, the tears on her cheek soaking into the shirt above May’s heart. Smoothing her hand gently over the girl’s hair, May presses down on the lump rising up in her own throat and tells her all the truths she can.

“You’re not going to find us, sweetheart—not on purpose, anyway. Someday, we’re going to find you. And the home isn’t going to be like anything that you’ve ever imagined, and your brothers and sisters will be so unique and amazing and strong that you’re going to fit right in with them because you’re amazing, too. We’re going to take care of each other, love each other, protect each other, and do so many unbelievable things together, but it’s not time for all that yet. That family is coming, Mary, I promise. I know that it will happen for you because I already watched it happen. Don’t give up on that promise, Mary, no matter how hard things get.”

Skye is crying steadily but quietly, her small hand clutching at May’s shirt, her sobs like tiny earthquakes echoing in her own ribcage.
“I don’t want to stay here,” the little girl finally manages in a quivering voice, muffled against May’s chest.

May hears the words that she can’t say:

I want to go home.

And May knows what’s coming as her head starts to go fuzzy and she nudges Skye gently to sit up.

“Mary…”

“Take me with you!” Skye grabs at May even as the woman tries to scoot back, locking her arms around May’s ribs and holding on for dear life. “Please, May! Please! I want to go with you!” she begs in a splintering voice.

May knows that’s impossible. She knows that Skye knows that’s impossible. And there is nothing she can say to make this better, so she just wraps her arms around the girl and holds right back for as long as she can.

“Please May please May please…” The girl is gradually dissolving into sobs, and May feels her own heart cracking in her chest.

“I will always come back,” she promises, thinking of the self-inflicted scars that will replace the bruises only a few years from now. She knows Skye will forget these words, but she says them anyway. “And someday, there’s going to be a time when I don’t leave you anymore. We’ll be with your family then, and you won’t ever have to leave us. I promise, sweetheart. I promise.”

She knows she should press Skye back so that she doesn’t have to feel her disappear, but May can’t make herself do it. Not even as her head spins and the world tilts dangerously. Instead, she grabs at the final seconds by bending her head and pressing her lips gently against the girl’s hair.

“I’m so sorry, Mary. I’ll see you soon.”

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**June 11, 2000— May is 44, Skye is 10**

This time, they’re outside.

May had been startled to appear in the open air, but the ten-year-old version of Skye had been prepared with a beach towel to wrap up in while May slipped on the clothes that Skye had brought her that day.

“You finally got me some pants!” she says with a smile, pulling on the worn-out jeans that Skye offered her with the same old Belmont University shirt. They’re actually almost the right size—they fit looser than she would ever buy, but they feel like they’ll stay on her hips without a belt.

“And some shoes,” Skye says proudly, holding up another plastic grocery bag. “I got lucky in the lost-and-found at the YMCA…”

“What’s the date?” May asks as she pulls the shirt quickly over her head. “Where are you living now?”

“June 11, 2000—Evansville, Indiana,” the girl answers.

*Summer in the Midwest. Could be worse.*
“Is everyone home right now?” May asks, stuffing her feet into the pair of sneakers. They’re at least a size too small, and there are no socks with them. *You can deal with that for a few hours. “Is that why you’re outside?”*

Skye shrugs. “Well, it’s Saturday, so it was going to be risky either way if I stayed in the house. This family doesn’t have a set schedule on the weekend.”

Ten-year-old Skye still has long, blunt-cut bangs, and her grown-out hair is fixed in two braids on either side of her head, dark against the lilac t-shirt she’s wearing with her jeans. She’s tanned and freckled, as if she’s spent a lot of time playing outside, and she nearly comes up to May’s shoulder as she stands beside her.

“This their backyard?” May asks, looking around. They’re tucked behind what looks like a gardening shed behind a stand of tall silver maples. A stockade-style fence hems in a deep backyard that ends with a red brick two-story house.

*Not the Brody’s. But not bad.*

“Yeah. We could slip out the back gate and go for a walk if you want,” Skye suggests as she stuffs the plastic grocery sack into her pocket. “It’s a nice neighborhood.”

May likes the sound of that—she remembers present-day-Skye saying that their actual outings together were pretty rare. “Would your mom let you?”

“Don’t call her my mom,” Skye snaps, surprisingly firm, striding past May towards the gate.

The neighborhood looks like most of the homes were built in the 50s but built to last, all red brick and big porches. The trees look like they’ve been there for decades, mostly stretching sycamores and wispy maples. May isn’t sure, at first, if Skye is too old to want her hand held as they walk, but the girl eventually slips her hand into May’s without it being offered. She’s quiet for the first block or two, so May does what she never does and starts the conversation.

“I lived in a neighborhood like this once when I was little,” May she says at one point as they walk under the outstretched bough of yet another maple. All the trees are green with high-summer vigor. May wishes she could have seen it in the fall.

She wonders if Skye will still be here to see it in the fall.

“Where?” the girl asks then, looking over, hooked.

Deciding that there’s no harm in telling her, May answers, “Virginia.”

“Did you live there long?” Skye asks, kicking a sycamore ball over the sidewalk ahead of them.

May shakes her head. “No. My dad was Air Force, so he was re-stationed every year or two.”

The girl looks over at her, surprised. “You’ve never told me that before,” she says quietly. “I didn’t know we…had something like that in common.”

May lets herself smile sadly. “It’s one of the few things.”

They walk a few more blocks in silence, with May reminding herself all over again just how little she *does* have in common with this girl—now or in the future. True, she had had an upbringing that was as almost as transient as Skye’s, but her family, at least, had always been consistent. She had been an only child, something she only later learned was just “the way things happened” rather than a
conscious decision on her parents’ part, and that focused attention (if not affection) had led to
opportunities that not every child got.

“I’ve never stayed anywhere for a year,” Skye says quietly at her elbow, and May turns her attention
back to the present. Well, her current present…

“You will eventually,” May promises, and this seems to burst the dam of future-related questions that
she knew was coming sooner or later.

“May, when you and I know each other in the future,” the girl goes on, looking down at the
sidewalk as she speaks, “do we live in one place?”

May thinks of the airplane that was built to be a constant no matter how much the scenery around it
changed, and the Base they’ve only been living in for a few weeks at this point.

“More or less,” she answers. It’s not exactly a lie.

“Do you still time travel a lot, even though you know me?”

She feels a suggestion of a smirk pull at one side of her mouth. “Well, I only started traveling to you
a few months after you and I finally met in the future, but recently, I started traveling to you a lot
more.”

She leaves it there. Skye doesn’t need to know why.

The girl still isn’t meeting her eyes, just pressing in with more questions as they continue to walk side
by side down the road.

“When you know me in the future…are you still older than me?” she asks.

“…Yes.” Though sometimes she forgets how much older…

“Do you have a family?”

“We’re part of a family together.”

“Do you ever time-travel to any of them?”

“No.”

“Do you ever visit yourself when you’re younger?”

“Oh yeah, definitely,” May answers, letting the grin break across her face. “That still happens
sometimes, but it happened a lot in those first few years after I started time-traveling.”

It’s one of the more satisfying things—finally experiencing a visit to herself from the other side,
finally getting to know what future her older self had been coming from and why she said the things
she did…

“The visits to myself make my past a little jumbled, though. I have a past that was before the
traveling began, but now my past includes visits back to some of those same places. I have memories
of myself visiting, and then I have memories of being the visitor. It’s weird.”

Skye hesitates just a little before her next question. “Are you married?”

May pauses, but remembers that Skye knew this when they first met in 2013.
They’ve reached a break in the houses where a small park opens up on one side of the street. It’s nothing stellar—just an uncomfortably-modern jungle gym on a mulch-bed plot with a few benches for parents and some ancient swingsets. A few families are there, strollers parked on the grass while children chatter and shriek as they run up and slide down, again and again. Without thinking, May leads them off the sidewalk towards the play area, stopping to watch the flurry of movement.

“May, if I ask you something, can you promise me that you will tell me the truth?” Skye asks suddenly, also staring over at the children in the park.

Her tone is serious, and May suddenly feels nervous.

Is this it? Is this when she finally put the pieces together?

“I do my best to never lie to you, Sk-Mary,” she says truthfully, “but there are times when I can’t tell you something, even if I want to.”

Skye is still looking away from her, chewing on her lip, and May is just about to say something else when the girl suddenly blurts it out:

“May, are you my mother?”

The question, so unexpected and so different from the one May was dreading, makes her nearly laugh in relief.

“No, I’m not your mother,” she answers with a relieved sigh, smiling at the girl.

Okay, we’re not to those questions yet, thank God…

Skye is looking at her now, a little dumbstruck, her brows knitting together.

“Are you…are you sure?” she asks slowly.

May just shakes her head, her relieved smile lingering. “I’ve never had a child, sweetheart. I’m no one’s mother.”

Skye sighs and looks away, reaching up to grab at the end of one of her braids, yanking nervously.

“What if you’re just not my mother yet?” the girl finally asks, looking hopefully over at her. “Like, you say we live together with a family in the future--but you and I do look a little bit alike. And you said you visited yourself when you weren’t yet a time traveler…so what if someday you’re pregnant and then you time travel and have the baby in the past, and that was me--”

“Mary…” May cuts her off, and the girl looks up at her again. The desperation in her eyes is devastating.

The desperation in her eyes is devastating.

Oh, this is a mess…

May sighs and reaches over to catch Skye’s free hand, leading her over to the nearest empty bench and sitting down on it. Skye sits slowly beside her, avoiding her eyes again, but she doesn’t pull her hand away.

“Mary, you and I are going to be close friends in the future, but I am definitely not your mother.” She takes a deep breath and tells her the rest. “I’ve never had a baby, and I won’t in the future, either. I
couldn’t even if I wanted to.”

Skye looks up at her, confused, and May forces herself to hold her gaze as she carefully lays out a delicate explanation.

“There’s a surgery that women can have that takes away the possibility of having kids,” she says, trying to find words that a ten-year-old can understand. “I had that surgery a few years ago, not long after I started traveling. I won’t have any children.”

Skye cocks her head, her brow furrowing again. “Why did you do that?”

May knows she doesn’t have to explain this to her, but understanding can sometimes make things easier to accept.

“There were a lot of reasons,” she says, looking over at the kids running and shrieking in front of them. “My husband and I had wanted to have kids before the Bad Thing happened, but we missed our chance. And then I wasn't willing to risk having kids after the traveling started because I knew that things would not only be hard, they'd be dangerous. What if I had a baby, or even a little child, and then time-traveled away and left her alone? Or worse, what if I time-traveled when I was carrying her and then she fell on the ground and got hurt? But worst of all…what if I was pregnant, and I time-traveled…but the baby didn’t time-travel too?”

The possibility nauseates her like it always has, and she falls silent.

Too far, Melinda. That was way too much to drop on a little kid.

She looks over at Skye and sees the girl looking down at her own lap, pulling her hand out of May’s to wrap her arms around herself as she stares downwards. When she does speak, her voice is so soft that May has to lean in close to hear it.

“I thought maybe…” She stops to swallow, and May sees her chin trembling against a sob. “I thought maybe…if you were my mom, and you left me here because I can't also time travel, then that would explain why I couldn't stay with you, but you always came back…why I don't have a family here…”

Oh…oh, Skye...

May slides across the bench until her hip is pressed against Skye’s and lays a gentle arm around the girl’s shoulders. She can tell that she’s trying to be a big girl, trying not to show her disappointment. The years are building up callouses on her already, and May hates that she’s the reason for many of them.

“Oh, sweetheart,” she whispers, tugging Skye gently until the girl tips slightly into her body, and May wraps her arms around her, resting her chin on the top of the girl’s head. Skye is still sitting up stiffly, but May feels her raise her hands to hide her face as the tears start to fall. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t realize that you thought that, or I would have told you sooner. I’m sorry I let you misunderstand. We’re part of a family together, it’s true, but it’s not one that’s related by blood, and our home…it’s not like any of the homes you’ve lived in. And what we are…well, there aren’t really words for it.” Not words you're ready to hear. "But you are so important to me, and I love you so, so much, and that’s the biggest reason that I always come back to you.”

She keeps her embrace steady as Skye cries against her while the summer sun beats down insistently on their skin. May watches the children on the playground run and shout and fall and get up, thinking of the life she missed her chance at, a life that would have never worked with the life she
ended up having.

*But I’m still getting that chance,* she marvels all over again. For whatever unbelievable reason, the universe has decided that she still gets to hold a child, read to a child, teach a child, watch that child grow up…even if that child is anything *but* her own daughter.

*I would have been so lucky…*

“May,” Skye finally says beneath her chin, raising her head and looking at her with red-rimmed eyes. “Do I ever know my mother? Does she want to know me? Is she even alive?”

May thinks of the trail of death following the Object of Unknown Origin and wishes she could give her a better answer.

“I don’t know,” she says honestly, raising her hand to smooth a lingering tear off Skye’s cheek. “But I’m sure if she could see the girl you’re growing up to be, or the girl I know in my present day, she would be very proud of you.”

Skye attempts to smile, and May’s heart swells in her chest.

She will never stop being thankful that the universe brought them together. But she also knows that she will never deserve this girl.

She leans in and kisses the girl’s forehead once, then stands and tugs her gently to her feet.

“Let’s keep going,” she suggests, draping her arm over Skye’s shoulders as she steers her back out towards another unknown road.

She comes back to the Playground with a sunburn and another story. And there too, Skye smiles as she leans against her heart and listens.

Chapter End Notes

We're creeping up on 100,000 words, which I *cannot* believe. For all of you who are just joining us, welcome to the bonfire. For those of you who have been keeping up with me for awhile, thanks for your patience and encouragement. I'm doing my best to write a lifelong love story, so thanks for sticking with me.
Recovery

Chapter Notes

I wanted to get this up before Daisy’s birthday, but it just didn’t happen. Oh well—our girls do get some kind of celebration this week anyway.

December 2013: May is 44, Skye is 24

Skye wakes up on December 4.

They’re back on American soil by then, grounded in Chicago at a private civilian airport. On their way back across the Atlantic two days before, Simmons had recommended that they return Skye to a hospital for the rest of her recovery period, but Coulson had shot that idea down immediately.

“We injected her with a drug that doesn’t exist, even according to SHIELD,” he had reminded the doctor as she and May faced him on the other side of his desk. “We don’t know why it was hidden and rigged to be buried, but if it was important enough for SHIELD but hide, we have to believe that there was a good reason for that. Civilian or SHIELD, it doesn’t matter—we are keeping all of this in-house.”

May had been watching Coulson carefully, looking for any signs that the knowledge she was sure he had dug up was working its bad magic in him. Besides the same haunted look in his eyes, however, she couldn’t see anything new to report to Fury.

She had, of course, already reported to him that one of their team members had been injected with the same drug that had her watching Coulson like a hawk. And though she knows exactly why Coulson wants to keep Skye out of everyone else’s hands, she also wants the girl to live. We didn’t come this far to give up.

As she had opened her mouth to back up Simmons, however, the younger woman had folded her arms across her chest and put her metaphorical foot down.

“Agent Coulson,” the scientist had said carefully in a voice trembling with something that was certainly not fear, “the letters after my name are P, H, and D. Not MD, not DO, and not RN. I am a biochemist, sir, not a physician, or a nurse, and certainly not a trauma surgeon. Nevertheless, I abide by the policy of caregivers to ‘First, do no harm,’ and if Skye experiences any complications in her recovery and requires an advanced procedure or more surgery, I will almost certainly not be able to provide it without resulting in more harm than good. You’ve made me her primary caregiver, and I will not allow you to withhold treatment from her. If you want what’s best for Skye, then you need to put her in the hands of someone who is well-practiced in what they’re doing, and that means that we need outside help, whether we like it or not. Do you understand?”

May had looked down so that Coulson wouldn’t see her smile.

Had no idea she had it in her.

Coulson had been silent as he gazed steadily at Simmons, who stared right back, unflinching. Finally
the man had sighed, looking down at his desk.

“All right, Dr. Simmons,” he had said, sounding resigned. “You find someone that we can trust outside of SHIELD—the smaller the team, the better. Once she’s found them, May,” he continued, looking up at her, “brief them on the classified nature of their work, vet them as well as you can, and bring them here. But no hospitals, and no samples going out. Skye and anything over hers that contains that drug stays on this plane.”

May had nodded solemnly before they left the room, but at the bottom of the spiral staircase, she had turned and caught Simmons’s eye.

“Thank you for fighting for her,” she said, touching the girl’s elbow gently.

The girl’s eyes had flickered to the square of white peeking out from the neck of May’s shirt, still covering her healing knife wound.

“Nothing you haven’t done for us,” the scientist had said softly before turning away, moving towards the stairs to the lab. “I’ll send you the medical staff’s information as soon as I find them.”

Two physicians and three nurses had been vetted and briefed before being allowed to rotate through the plane for the next few days. Throughout it all, May and the rest of the team took turns at Skye’s bedside, spelling one another in short stretches so that all of them could rest and recover from the draining past few days. Skye’s systems had begun functioning acceptably by only the second day after the injection, so her ventilator and dialysis machine had been removed. The med staff was keeping a close eye on everything else, and May had kept her bugs in the lab and the pod tuned carefully for any sounds of people discussing GH-325, but so far, it was only FitzSimmons predictably running tests on the trace amounts left in the vial. The sample seemed to have fortunately broken down already, which at least left one less thing for May to worry about right now.

“You’d think it would be easier by now,” Coulson said at one point when she was back up in his office, sitting quietly on his sofa and pretending that she wasn’t watching Skye’s monitor feed on his wall.

“You’d think what would be easier?” she repeats, glancing over at him, unsurprised to see him staring at their patient below-deck.

“Losing an agent,” he says quietly. “Or almost losing them.”

May thought of the way she’d time-traveled after he died the first time, after she thought he had died a second time, and now twice after Skye had nearly done the same. In those two short weeks since Coulson had been captured and tortured for this very information about TAHITI, something had somehow shifted in their world, pushing the girl from one place in May’s heart to another. Two visits in those two weeks had given her a bigger picture of the life the girl had made it through to get this far. A conversation with a lapsed agent in Mexico had given her their only glimpse into where the girl had come from in the first place.

*But it was all her*, May thought as she turned her gaze to the monitor again, watching the girl’s chest rise and fall with the peaceful rhythm of sleep as her body rebuilt itself from the inside. *She couldn’t have rushed this if she’d wanted to. But somehow, she changed your mind anyway.*

*She pulled you into orbit.*

May had, at one point, been woken from a light sleep at Skye’s bedside to see Simmons taking down vitals and checking Skye’s IV. May watched without moving, however, as the woman’s hands
lingered on Skye’s skin even after she finished checking the needle site and placed Skye’s arm back on the mattress. The woman’s fingertips hovered, smoothing gently over her forearm, reading the lines written there. Her brow furrowed, and May knew that she understood.

“It’s all right, Simmons,” May had said softly, making the not-a-doctor jump, her eyes flying to May’s. “They’re all old scars.”

Simmons looked towards Skye’s face, still slack with sleep, the concern visibly condensing into heartbreak. “I didn’t know…” she said quietly, heavy words with too many meanings considering present company.

I didn’t know about her.

I didn’t know about you.

“You don’t have to carry everyone’s baggage too, Simmons,” May had said quietly, catching the doctor’s eye again.

Simmons looked like she was trying to smile reassuringly, but couldn’t quite push it out. “Neither do you,” she’d said somberly, and if May wasn’t positive that no one on this plane knew what she was really here for, she might have been nervous.

She steers them away by attempting the deferred conversation again.

“About what you learned the other day,” she began.

“Agent May,” Simmons had cut her off, avoiding May’s eyes, “you said not to worry about it for now, and that’s what I’m attempting to do, at least until this one—“ She waved vaguely towards Skye “—is back to normal. So please, let me do what you said.”

A movement out of the corner of May’s eye had made her look over at Skye’s bed again. The girl in it was moving slightly, tipping her head away from the sound. In her chest, May’s heart had leapt.

“Skye?” she said quietly, reaching out and touching the girl’s nearest hand, squeezing gently.

The girl did not move again, but she did open her eyes.

Skye:

Everything hurts.

Her chest feels like it is on fire as she breathes, her throat scraped raw and her mouth dried out. Her limbs ache with a stiffness that seems to have her frozen in her current position, and every movement, every reaction, takes a Herculean effort. There are people that she doesn’t recognize saying things she doesn’t understand, and everything is too loud and too bright…but it is all a welcome pain.

She’s alive.

Her head feels stuffed with cotton as she processes Simmons’ anxious face as the doctor leans over her. She’s vaguely aware of hands touching her and questions being asked, but she can’t summon the energy to answer. A doctor she doesn’t recognize is explaining a PCA pump and tucking something into her hand. Skye can barely nod in understanding—it feels like lifting a mountain just to raise her head again. The doctor presses her thumb against the button, and a comforting wave of
pain relief seeps quickly through her body. A nurse is offering her ice chips for her dry mouth and throat, but she’s already nodding off again, her head sinking back into her pillow and lolling away from the chatter.

But before her eyes drift shut, she sees the woman standing at the other side of her bed, and Skye uses the last of her energy to turn her hand palm-up, holding May’s gaze until the woman reaches out and places her hand in it, squeezing gently.

Skye drifts off again, tethered to the surface.

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**May:**

By December 7, Skye is able to eat small meals and stay awake for a couple of hours at a time. She still tires quickly and needs regular doses of pain medication, but her wounds are already closed with early scar tissue, and all the tests are coming back positive and promising, so Coulson dismisses the med-staff after they train Simmons on the rest of Skye’s post-op patient-care. May knows it’s not that he doesn’t care—he just isn’t willing to risk any more people around their intel than there has to be.

She watches on the security feed when Coulson visits Skye, smiling at the way the girl’s face brightens. She still can’t really see Coulson’s face on the monitor, but she can see something in his posture relax as he sits down on a stool beside the girl’s bed and talks to her quietly until she tires out again and settles back down to sleep. He had described the mission to her—from Italy to Zurich to Algeria—but he hadn’t said anything about the source of the drug that saved her life.

It’s only a small relief.

Only a few days later, he disappears for “personal business.” May knows where he’s going. She’s already warned Fury.

By December 10, it becomes apparent that the team’s new responsibility is to keep Skye in bed, so they all start taking shifts keeping her company in the pod.

“You’re going to give Simmons a coronary if she catches you walking around alone again,” May murmurs as she eases the girl back into bed, having just caught her trying to manage the steps up to the cabin on her own.

“Not my fault there isn’t a bathroom on this level,” the girl grumbles, her face pulling into a faint grimace as she lies back down. “And the doctors said I needed to work up to walking again…”

“With help,” May reminds her, laying the covers back over the girl as she settles back into the mattress. “You’re only supposed to be walking around with help in case something goes wrong. And definitely no stairs by yourself.”

Skye groans and throws an arm dramatically over her eyes. “If I had any pride left, I’d feel so ashamed that you all have been demoted to bathroom chaperones for me.”

“That wasn’t the first time I’ve been in a bathroom with you,” May says with a smirk, and the confusion in Skye’s eyes makes her realize that in all the days since the girl woke up, she still hasn’t remembered to tell her about the things that happened just to her during those days between Thanksgiving and now.

So she tucks in close to Skye’s bedside, speaking low enough that she knows the security monitor won’t pick it up, and pulls the List out of her pocket, spreading it on the mattress and letting Skye see the fourth date added beside an existing date on the paper.
Skye smiles as she stares at the date, then glances up at May. “I spent a lot of time wondering what happened to you that day,” she says, also quietly. “You were so upset about something, and you were bleeding…and I’d seen you bleeding before, I’d seen you sad or anxious before, but I’d never seen you that…shaken. Like all of those things had hit you at once.”

“You tried to comfort me,” May says quietly, staring down at the paper, “but of course I couldn’t tell you what was really happening…”

“Didn’t you know I’d make it?” Skye asks, her brow furrowing. “There are so many dates left on the paper—didn’t you know I’d make it through this?”

But May shakes her head. “A person doesn’t have to be alive in my present for me to travel to them,” she says, glancing up at Skye. “I traveled to Coulson once when he was dead before.”

Skye looks a little startled, and she moves them on.

“What about your shoulder?” the girl prompts, glancing at the shoulder that was bleeding all over her clothes six years ago. “What happened to it?”

May tugs aside the neck of her t-shirt and shows Skye the healing wound. “Knife wound from the Italian rat who sold us out. It started bleeding again when I traveled, probably because the bandage got ripped off my skin as I went.”

A soft sound of someone clearing their throat makes them both jump slightly, looking towards the door, where Simmons is standing with a tray of soft food. Skye instantly grabs the list off the mattress, attempting to stuff it quickly beneath the blankets, and May realizes that there’s one more thing the girl hasn’t been filled in on.

“It’s all right, Skye,” she says, stopping the girl’s hand with her own. “Simmons knows.”

Dr. Simmons doesn’t add anything to the conversation as May quietly fills in a very flustered Skye on her disappearance when Skye was coding, as well as the presence of a second Melinda who had been responsible for getting the plane off the ground in time when the self-destruct timer ran out at the Guesthouse.

“And you believed her?” Skye says disbelievingly, directing her question towards Simmons.

The scientist bites her lip, glancing at May. “I did once I saw one Agent May appear and the other disappear.”

Skye grins, still seeming a little amazed that this conversation is actually happening. “It’s a pretty convincing party trick,” she says. “Memorable, anyway.”

Simmons’s brow furrows. “How long have you known?” she asks Skye, glancing between the two of them.

Skye looks at May, allowing her to respond as much as she thinks wise, and May almost smiles.

“I met Skye when she was brought onto our bus back in August, she says, glancing at the girl beside her, “but she had already met me several times when she was a little girl. About a month ago, I started visiting her past.” She reaches under the blanket and extracts the worn sheet of paper, turning it over and offering it to Simmons. “Four visits down, several more to go.”

Simmons takes the paper and examines it silently, her face calm but her mind obviously racing, trying to work it out.
“There was a time,” she finally says, lowering the paper and handing it back to May, “that I thought I had seen everything.”

“And then I almost died, huh?” Skye offers, an attempt at levity that sprawls awkwardly in the silence.

Simmons looks at May, and the woman sees the helpless look in her eyes.

“You don’t have to have an answer or an explanation, Simmons,” she tells the girl quietly. “You just need to keep it a secret.”

*One of many things, right now.*

The scientist excuses herself a moment later after taking a few vials of Skye’s blood—*Follow up with that later; I think I know what she’s doing*—and Skye turns back to May, turning her hand up on the mattress. May places the paper in it, her eyes lingering on the white scar that she can see on the girl’s wrist.

“You know, there were two of me there that night, too,” she says, glancing up at Skye. “The last time, as far as I know, that you almost died, I mean.”

Skye looks surprised. “I didn’t know that, no,” she breathes. “How does that work?”

“I’m the one who found you in your bedroom and went with you to the hospital,” May answers, tracing a fingertip lightly over the line on Skye’s skin, “but sometime in the future, I’ll be sent back to that same day and be the one who calls an ambulance and writes down all the information that the hospital needed to know about you. It happens sometimes—the most significant events are the ones I travel back to multiple times.”

“What else is as significant as me almost dying?” Skye asks, then visibly kicks herself for asking.

May looks down again as she answers. “Mostly just Bahrain.”

They are both quiet for a moment, but then Skye raises her left arm, glancing towards the faint pattern of stripes carved into the pale skin of her forearm.

“Did Simmons see?” she asks quietly, and May looks up, nodding once. Skye sighs. “Okay. One more thing I can talk about with her later.”

“What happened between—“ May glances down at the list “2004 and 2007? When I saw you, you were sleeping in a library bathroom…”

“Rehab first, then a group home in New York,” Skye answers, looking away. “Cutting wasn’t an easy habit to kick, but I took the professional help that was offered, like you told me to. Things didn’t necessarily get better right away, but I did. So when the foster system decided I was too much of a hazard to myself to be put back in a home and they put me in St. Agnes in NYC, it wasn’t the worst thing. But things were pretty restrictive there, and by then I was convinced that I could take care of myself just fine. So before all the legal processes started when I was getting close to eighteen and bout to finally be no one’s problem…I left. Bought a ticket and left town, and didn’t look back. Spent the next few years still bouncing around, but it wasn’t all horrible. I knew if wouldn’t last forever…because someday, I’d find you.”

May doesn’t know what to say, so she just stares down at the list resting beneath Skye’s hand.

“I don’t think I can ever apologize enough, Skye,” May says, the words squeezing out around the
lump in her throat, “but I am so sorry for the way I’ve been… I—“

“You didn’t know, May,” Skye interrupts quietly, and May looks up just in time to see the girl’s hand move to rest lightly on hers, a cautious reassurance, even as Skye’s dark eyes hold her own firmly. “I don’t hold it against you. You didn’t know.”

May stares at this girl, marveling all over again that this is the same person she left in a hospital bed ten years ago, who had nearly died again just two weeks ago, and fights the urge to tell Skye what she knows is true.

*I don’t deserve that forgiveness. You deserved better than me.*

With her other hand, she reaches for the paper and spreads it out between them, pointing at the first date on the list. “Tell me what you remember. Tell me what I have to look forward to.”

Skye smiles, pulls over the tray of food, settles into her pillows, and talks.

She tells May about the first visit: a stranger she’d never seen before catching her out of bed and offering to read her the book that she was up reading. A promise that they would see each other again just before the woman disappeared right out of her clothes.

She tells May about the next date, months later, a blistering-cold day in Nebraska (“Don't ask me why but I remember that it was the day before Groundhog Day...” May finds a pen and scribbles the date at the very top of the list). A laundry room and a close call with a foster mom.

She's starting to tell May about the third visit, actually the first date that May had written on the List, when Skye starts yawning. May smiles as she stands up and tucks the list back into her pocket.

“We’ve got plenty of time for the rest of the stories,” she says, rolling the bedside table away and lowering the head of the girl’s hospital bed and pulling the covers up around her shoulders. “Get some rest. And the next time you wake up, promise you’ll call for one of us before attempting the stairs by yourself again. Deal?”

Skye smiles sleepily up at her, reaching up and catching May's nearest hand in a gentle squeeze. “Deal.”

But that night, they get word that Ian Quinn’s trial date is set for the next day, and Skye has to pre-record her testimony and then be present over video to appear for cross-examination. The whole team also appears via video for questioning, and when it’s over, they all wait at the holocom together until they get confirmation of a guilty verdict. Quinn will be sent to the Fridge.

May hopes it’s a subterranean cell.

Skye is so visibly shaken at the end of that day that Simmons helps her upstairs to take a proper shower, obviously hoping that it would help her feel better. May hovers anxiously nearby until Skye immerses with Simmons from her bunk, dressed in fresh clothes and with her damp hair loosely braided over one shoulder. They both help the girl back down the stairs and back into her bed, which has been re-made with fresh sheets. Simmons gives Skye her painkillers for the night, checks that the pulse monitor is functioning appropriately, and dims the lights in the pod. Before she leaves, the doctor leans over the edge of the bed and pulls Skye into a gentle embrace.

“I’m so proud of you,” May hears Simmons whisper as she looks away, feeling like she’s intruding on a private moment.

“Same,” Skye whispers back, weakly returning the embrace.
Simmons pulls back, and as she says goodnight, she glances knowingly at May.

“Wake me if anything goes wrong,” she says…orders. May feels her brows pull together, but the girl doesn’t wait around for questions. Flipping the lights off in the hallway, she’s just gone.

“I’m afraid,” Skye says quietly, drawing May's gaze back to her. The girl is staring at the pill bottle on her bedside table. “I’m afraid of what will happen once I stop taking these.” She looks over at May. “Right now, I don’t dream. But you’ve told me that you have nightmares, even years down the road from Bahrain…”

She looks up at May, her eyes begging for reassurance, and May hates that she can see the bright-eyed joy dimmed a little, a second victim of the gunshots that ripped the girl’s body apart.

“I’ll be right back,” May says quietly, moving out of the pod and up the stairs.

She returns with the object that had been placed in her hand only a few weeks before.

“You can borrow it for as long as you want,” she says, hanging the dreamcatcher over the head of Skye’s bed. The girl looks almost tearful as she smiles at May in the darkness, and May can’t help brushing a gentle hand over her hair.

“What about you?” she offers, and Skye nods gratefully. May pulls the stool to the bedside and sits down beside her, and Skye extends one hand cautiously. May takes it, wrapping the cool fingers in her own.

“Let’s go,” Skye says quietly, resting her head on the mattress beside their joined hands. “This is part of the healing too—letting other people help you through it.”

Skye drifts off only a few minutes later, but May lingers until she feels herself starting to nod off. She goes upstairs and crawls into her own bed, unable to avoid noticing the bare space on the wall where the dreamcatcher had hung.

She isn’t even surprised when she wakes up somewhere else.

December 31, 2009: May is 44, Skye is 20

“Hey, May,” she hears a voice sing as she opens her eyes and sees a warmly-lit bedroom, cluttered and cramped but with enough space for her to be sprawled on the carpet between a desk and a bed. A fleece blanket lands lightly on her skin, and May pulls it around herself and sits up in time to see a very adult version of Skye come to sit on the bed above her, a mascara wand still clutched in one hand.

“So, some of my friends are meeting up at Sixth Street tonight,” Skye is saying, closing up the mascara and tossing it back onto her dresser. “I was hoping you’d be up for going out with us.”

Sixth Street? Going out?
“Wait, first things first,” May says, holding up one hand, barely remembering to tighten the blanket around her as she does. “Where are we? What’s the date?”

Skye grins wider. “Austin, Texas, and it’s New Year’s Eve! So come on!” the girl says, jumping to her feet and rushing to her closet. “You can wear my clothes. Hopefully you can just put on a couple of pairs of socks and my boots will be okay for you.”

Another dress comes flying out, this one also black but long-sleeved with a lace-covered open back. “Should fit fine,” Skye calls as she digs out a pair of black stiletto ankle-boots and tosses them on the floor beside May. “Get dressed, and I’ll help you fix your hair.”

“Skye…” May says, still curled inside the blanket on the floor. Skye finally stops, looking quizzically at her. May sighs. “I don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Why not?” Skye says, the faintest hint of sass creeping into her voice. “You not much for crowds? Or just don’t want to be seen in public with me?”

“Oh, come on,” May mutters, climbing to her feet only to sit right back down on the bed as her head spins dangerously. “What are you going to tell your friends? ‘This is my time-traveling friend—don’t worry if she disappears out of her clothes right in front of you?’”

“I’ll tell them you’re my friend who’s just in town for the party,” Skye says with a roll of her eyes. “And I’d be willing to bet that they’ll be too drunk to remember you anyway.”

“Is that the company you keep?” May asks, slightly disappointed but not really surprised. “Aren’t you still underage anyway?”

“Not according to my ID,” Skye smirks. “So are we doing this or not?”

When May hesitates, Skye switches tactics. “Come on May,” she says with a sigh, coming to sit beside May on the bed. “I want to hang out with you—it’s been nine months since I saw you last, and I was sick for half that visit, so that barely counts. And really, you and I have never gotten spend a holiday together. So please, will you come out with me? I just want to do something that normal couples do for once.”

There’s a lot May could say to that, starting with the question of what’s so normal about weaving through crowded bars and dodging handsy drunks and downing cheap shots until it’s time to watch a ball drop…but the last noun is the only word she can focus on.

“We’re not a *couple*, Skye,” she reminds the girl carefully, but the girl just rolls her eyes again.

“I know…I know, we’re not a couple. You’re an adult and I’m a kid. Fine—we’re just friends. Now will you please come out with me? I promise I won’t get trashed. Just…one holiday? It would be great to have just one holiday with you.”

May can tell that Skye’s fully aware that that was the best way to phrase the request. *If good memories are all you can really give her, then why would you withhold that?*

May sighs and picks up the dress off the bed. Skye’s face lights up.

“You’d better be loaning me underwear too.”

The clothes are absolutely not her style, but they fit well enough, and May pulls on a pair of tights and socks inside the shoes before standing at the dresser to work her hair into a quick twist pinned
“How long have you been living in Austin?” May asks in the mirror as Skye sets a pair of black rhinestone studs on the dresser in front of her. “The last time I visited you, you were still 17.”

Skye smiles in the mirror at her. “Just a few months. I was in NOLA for about a year before this, and then a friend there got me connected with her sister in Austin, who was looking for someone to rent her extra room.”

“What have you been doing here?” May asks as she finds Skye’s makeup bag and sweeps a single layer of eye shadow and mascara on.

“Got another day job, and I’ve been moonlighting with some other hackers—” Skye suddenly cuts herself off, like she’s afraid she’s said too much.

In the mirror, May smirks to herself. “It’s all right, Skye, I know all about your hacking antics,” she says, hesitating over the earrings, certain they’ll be lost if they fall on the street when she disappears out of them.

“I don’t mind if I lose them,” Skye says as if reading her mind. May smiles and puts them on, turning with a shrug to face the girl.

“Well?” she says, glancing down at herself—the dress, the tights, the boots...

_Probably the only time in my life I will put on an outfit like this…_

When she looks up again, though, the warmth in Skye’s eyes is startling.

“You look…really great,” she finally says, smiling at her as she steps closer. The girl opens her mouth to say something else, but a loud rendition of “TikTok” suddenly blares from the phone on the dresser behind May. Skye snatches up the phone and answers the call.

“Hey Luke,” she says as she answers, grabbing a black corduroy jacket off the back of the door and tossing it to May. “Yeah, we’re walking out the door right now. See you in twenty.”

Skye throws the phone into a small over-the-shoulder bag and grabs another jacket off the bed, throwing it over her shoulders. “All right,” she says with a grin, opening the door and gesturing May dramatically through it. “Let’s go party.”

Half an hour later, May is following Skye through the busy walking street, one hand clutching the girl’s purse strap so that she doesn’t lose her in the crowds. Music pours out of the open doors of the bars where young people stand in lines to be carded at the door. Every tree on the street is hung with Christmas lights, and the winter air is pleasantly crisp through May’s borrowed coat. It seems like a great place to spend New Year’s, but it also seems like several thousand people had the same idea.

“I don’t usually do this,” Skye says apologetically over her shoulder as they wade through what feels like half the population of Austin. “Mostly because I can’t afford it. But thanks for indulging me tonight.”

May says something in response, but it gets swallowed up by the bass of a speaker as they pass an outdoor bandstand. She sees a stage set up with dancing lights and screens, presumably where a ball will drop later tonight.

“Oh, the last text I got said they were in here;” Skye suddenly says, turning off the street and plunging them into a blue-lit bar, which seemed for the moment less hectic than its neighbors.
“Skye!” a young man calls over the heads of most of the patrons, and May lets go of the girl’s purse as she rushes over to greet him with a hug.

*He looks older than the last one I met…*

May stays where she is until Skye beckons her over. “Luke, this is my friend, May. May, this is Luke.”

May lifts one hand in silent greeting, not bothering to smile.

“Where’s Travis?” Skye asks, turning back to the young man. “And Stace and Kira?”

“Bar and bathroom,” Luke answers. “It’s already been a long night. Here, sit down. I’ll get us some more shots.”

May takes a seat in the small booth that Skye’s friend must have been staking out since dinner, and the girl crowds in beside her.

“Just so you know, Luke is just a friend,” Skye says, answering the raised eyebrow that May gives her. “He’s about as interested in girls as Stace is interested in boys. And Travis is Kira’s boyfriend.”

“They hackers too?” May asks, and Skye looks confused.

“What, you think hackers have some kind of secret society where everyone knows everyone?” she asks, and May can’t help smirking again.

“Maybe not yet, they don’t,” she answers cryptically.

Skye’s friends return at that point, sliding into the booth across from and beside them and passing around greetings.

“This is my friend, May,” Skye says to the group, slipping an arm around May’s shoulders. “She’s just here for the night.”

“Little old for you, don’t you think?” one of the girls—Stace, presumably—says, eyeing May across the table. She has bright red hair that is shaved off on one side of her head. “What is she, your teacher?”

“Fuck off, Stace,” Skye says defensively, then mutters to May, “Just ignore her—she’s wasted.”

“Got there waiting for you,” the girl says, pushing two shots towards Skye. “Now hurry up join me.”

Skye takes the shots from the table and offers one to May. The liquid inside is bright green. “To 2009,” Skye says, clinking her shotglass against May’s. “It had a good run.” And before May can protest, she’s downed the shot, so May knocks hers back too.

*Might as well.*

“All right,” Travis says, standing up. “I’ll get us one more round and then we’ve gotta get this party really going.”

Three shots and an hour later, their ragtag group is in the middle of yet another bar, this one filled to bursting with people and thumping with a bass that May can feel in her bones. One of Skye’s friends had managed to snag them all drinks from the bar, but May has already passed her vodka-tonic off to another guest—if her head spins, she needs to make sure she knows that it’s her warning bell that she’s about to time-travel. Skye’s arm is around May’s waist as they weave through the crowd to
tuck themselves against a black-carpeted wall. Once they stop, however, Skye’s hand remains lightly on her opposite hip while the girl sips her drink. The last hour hasn’t really been conducive to conversation, but now that they’re more or less alone again, Skye takes her chance, leaning close to May’s ear to be heard over the music.

“You’d better plan to kiss me at midnight,” she says, her words barely slurred, “otherwise Stace will probably try. And she’s hot, sure, but I’m not really interested—“

“Skye…” May says, turning to face the girl, which may have been a mistake, since the gesture has brought their faces very close together. The girl just smirks, a knowing look in her eye as May draws back a little. “I don’t know what you’re thinking, but you’re twenty and I’m—“

“But I won’t always be, will I?” Skye cuts her off, leaning back into May’s space. “Someday, I mean.”

Wait.

May suddenly becomes very aware of the hand on her hip, and she reaches over to push Skye’s hand gently away.

“Skye, I don’t know what I’ve led you to believe in this past, but you and I aren’t…it’s not like that between us.”

At least, not that I’m aware of…

Skye looks a little confused for a moment, then a little hurt, but something seems to suddenly occur to her, and she smiles.

“May, let me ask you: the present-day you’re coming from…how long have you known me there?”

May hesitates before answering vaguely, “A couple of months.”

I think I know where you’re going with that…

Skye smiles wider then, moving the hand that had been holding May’s side to brush gently down May’s cheek.

“Then what if it’s just not like that yet?”

And before May can respond, Skye leans in and kisses her.

It is gentle and tender but it barely lasts for half a second because May immediately pushes the girl firmly back with a hand against her sternum.

“Skye,” May says sharply, holding the girl’s gaze. Skye looks a little abashed, but not exactly remorseful.

“You…” May tries to say, but she can’t finish the sentence.

You...

You can’t do that.

You shouldn’t want do that.

I shouldn't want…
But as she stares through the dancing lights at the girl, her heart racing from the surprise and panic, she feels the warning tug in her stomach, which snaps her into action.

“I’ve gotta go,” she says quickly, turning and weaving her way towards the door.

“Wait! May, wait!” she hears the girl calling after her, but she doesn’t slow down until she bursts through the exit back into the cool night air. She stumbles slightly and feels equally unsteady hands catch her, and then Skye is pulling her quickly around the side of the building, barely away from the crowds on the walking street.

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” May hears Skye repeating as her head swills and she leans heavily on her shoulder against the side of the building. “I know I shouldn’t have done that. I’m sorry. Please don’t be mad.”

May raises her head, fighting against the wave of vertigo. For the first time tonight, Skye looks her age, her eyes fixed on May’s and begging for reassurance.

“It’s…” May cuts herself off from saying It’s okay.

Because is it?

This isn't right. It shouldn't be okay. It's a terrible idea and it makes no sense.

But they’re out of time.

It’s not quite midnight, but May doesn’t want to leave it like this either. She raises one arm, and Skye rushes into her embrace. May squeezes her neck even as she feels the world tilt.

“August 20, 2010,” she says quickly, turning her face into the girl’s hair and brushing her lips briefly against Skye's temple. “I’ll see you soon.”

She hears a midnight countdown begin somewhere in the distance. Before it gets to one, however, she’s long gone.
If you're reading this after 3:30 pm Beijing time on July 18, then you're reading the final version. I waffled on the ending until posting but just now changed my mind again and added the very last section. If you're re-reading since the original update, yes, there are some differences. Just a heads up.

December 16, 2013: Skye is 24, May is 44

She hurts a lot less today.

Fitz has been her only company so far today, bringing her breakfast and chatting with her while she ate. Skye has since been waiting for Simmons to come in and do her morning check-up, or for May to come downstairs and hang out with her some more. Spending the past few days with a woman who bears slightly more resemblance to her oldest friend had been...nice. Needed. But, as before, no amount of time with May ever feels like enough.

Skye’s trying and failing to not let herself be analyzing the small collection of expressions that she sees whenever May looks at her now, trying to see if the look she’s always having to bar from her own expression is finally reflected back at her. Something is different; that’s obvious if only from May’s willingness to spend so much time with her while she’s stuck in a med-pod. But it could just be concern, a slight softening of May’s usual perfunctory care for everyone around her.

There’s no way of knowing—there’s only waiting.

As always.

By now, it’s been nearly an hour since Fitz left with her breakfast tray and no one else has been in to check on her, so Skye decides to attempt a trip up to the cabin level to walk around and see what everyone’s up to.

She should have known that was all she had to do to bring Simmons scurrying.

“It’s like you have a sense for whenever my butt lifts off the bed,” Skye deadpans as Jemma enters the pod, her scowl fixed firmly in place at the sight of Skye attempting to get out of bed.

“Back in it,” her doctor orders humorlessly as she bends to check the monitors on the wall.

Simmons won’t be persuaded that she’s ready to be up and moving yet, and the scientist starts taking more blood samples as soon as Skye is in her bed again.

“Not sure how I feel about Dr. Simmons.” Because that’s who she’s been seeing the most of lately. Not Jemma, not Agent Simmons: Dr. Simmons. “She’s so strict. And pokey.

“Well Patient Skye is unruly and stubborn,” Jemma returns with only a trace of a smile as she fills a third vial from Skye’s shunt.

“And grateful,” Skye adds, because she can’t say it enough. “I hope you know that.”
Simmons looks up at her with a shy smile, and if the woman’s hands weren’t gloved and currently working with the needle taped to her arm, Skye would have reached out to squeeze her hand.

“Does that actually work?” the scientist asks, nodding at the dreamcatcher still hanging over the head of Skye’s bed. “I remember you buying that—thought it was just for decoration.”

Skye glances up and shrugs. “I didn’t dream at all last night, so it must do something.”

Simmons murmurs something noncommittal as she pulls the last of the filled vials off of Skye’s shunt.

“Can you tuck that under my pillow, actually?” Skye requests, nodding toward the charm, and Simmons obliges her, just before Ward walks in.

She hasn’t been paying attention to how much she’s seen of her S.O. since she woke up, but she guesses he’s been around almost as much as May. Coulson had filled her in on what had happened with Quinn and Agents Garrett and Triplett, who she’s only seen by re-watching their security feeds, and the way they had all pulled together to find the underground base that held the miracle drug that had brought her back from the edge. She hadn’t realized until then what a team effort it had been to save her life.

She can tell that Ward is making a big effort to be kind as Simmons leaves them alone together, but his awkward attempts at compliments (“You look better than when you were dying…”) fall hilariously flat. There’s something a little less distant, a little more intense, in his gaze as he tries to stop her from berating herself about going into Quinn’s place alone.

“Thanks to you, every SHIELD agent in the country knows Mike Petersen’s alive.”

Coulson hadn’t tried to get her to debrief right after she’d woken up a few weeks ago, but as soon as she’d recounted to the team what she’d seen in the basement before Quinn shot her, the messages about Mike had been sent out to all of SHIELD.

“Agent Garrett’s running point on Mike,” Ward says as he sits down on the stool beside her bed. “Thinks he’s part of some project called Deathlok.”

Garrett…my S.O.’s S.O. Right…

Skye thinks back to the exchange between Quinn and Mike…the way the latter had completely refused to acknowledge her, the burn scarring across his face, the resigned look in his eyes…

“He looked like death…” Skye says quietly, staring down at her hands. “...They did something to him. He needs help.”

“He’s past help,” Ward says, a little too forcefully, and she glances up. “He was there with you,” her S.O. goes on, a glint in his eyes. “He could have projected you, but he let this happen to you. And I’ll never forgive that.”

There is something different about his tone that makes Skye want to look away, but she forces herself to hold his gaze and change the subject completely.

“Well, I need to better project myself. So, when Simmons gives the all-clear, we’ll start training.”

I need to be my own agent…but I need to be a real agent.

“We’ll ease you back into it,” Ward tries to say, but she cuts him off.
“No. I want to train harder. Next time, I don’t want to depend on some miracle drug to save me.”

Or you.

Or May.

“Have you seen May today?” Skye asks then, raising her eyebrows expectantly.

Ward looks surprised, but he just shakes his head. “No, not at all,” he says.

Skye clamps her mouth shut, a sickening feeling moving through her.

She might be time-traveling...

...Ward isn’t supposed to know...

“I mean,” she says quickly, “I’m sure she’s around somewhere…”

And suddenly, May is there, leaning in the med-pod door.

“Ward,” the woman says tersely, “conference call, upstairs right now. Get Fitzsimmons and bring them up with you.” She doesn’t even look at Skye before turning to go.

“May!” Skye says, elbowing herself up off the bed, barely wincing at the pain in her abdomen. “Can I—“

“You stay put,” the woman says, still brusque, glancing back at her only once. There is something different in May’s eyes as they meet hers though, something that makes her settle back into her pillow without another word.

May:

She’s waiting around the holocom for the rest of her team, anxiously tapping her nails against the Plexiglas surface.

“Are you going to tell me what’s bothering you?” Coulson says from the screen behind her, and May doesn’t even bother turning around to glare at him.

“Nope,” she answers bluntly.

Where would I even start...

She had tumbled back into her bunk still in the midnight hours, but trying to got back to sleep right away had been useless. The thoughts had blown in a steady stream in her mind for the next few hours—what she had seen and heard and felt...

“Ah! Agent Coulson!” Simmons says airily as she and Fitz enter the conference room with Ward right behind them and see Coulson’s face filling the upright screen. “I was hoping you would call in soon! I have some questions about the—“

“Not right now, Simmons,” Coulson cuts her off, the picture wobbling slightly as he adjusts this grip on his phone. He’s obviously sitting in his corvette in a parking garage, but May hasn’t even bothered to ask where he is. “Everyone, I just took a call from HQ—there’s something going on in the Southwest, and they want our mobile unit to be first contact. Dr. Simmons, is Skye clear to travel?”
“Yes, sir,” the girl answers, tucking her frustration away for later. “As long as you don’t intend for her to leave her bed.”

“I don’t,” Coulson says firmly. She hears him turn the key in his car’s ignition. “May, get us on a course to Death Valley. I’ll be meeting you there. We’ve got some mischief to check out.”

**December 17, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 24**

She really wasn’t expecting to be leading a full SHIELD convoy from their plane out into the desert, but considering the mayhem that the last Asgardian brought with him, May guesses that four trucks of agents are still a little on the optimistic side.

“We’re definitely getting close,” Fitz says from the backseat, staring at his tablet and watching the atmospheric energy surges, “but it’s a bit of a crap-shoot. This is still science that we don’t completely understand.”

“So Coulson hasn’t talked to you?” Ward says from the shotgun seat beside May, shifting his gaze over to her. “About why he changed his mind on giving Skye that injection?”

She hasn’t missed the fact that he’s been almost as curious as her, if more subtle about it. “No,” she says truthfully, keeping her eyes on the road. “He’s keeping it to himself.”

And you keep out of it.

“Whoa!” Fitz says suddenly. “I’m getting a massive energy surge, three times the level of the one before.”

“How close?” May demands, hands tensing on the wheel.

The sky above them suddenly opens in a swath of light and color, meeting the road ahead of them with a pulse that May feels in her bones. She cuts the wheel around it even as she slams on the brakes, and by the time she looks over, the light is gone and a woman is rising from a crouch in the middle of a Celtic-knot pattern scorched onto the asphalt.

The other cars quickly empty, armed SHIELD agents standing ready to react if this visitor turns out to be more like Loki than like Thor. May can’t take her eyes off the woman as she climbs out of the car and steps between the figure and her team. She’s seen what footage exists in SHIELD’s archives of Asgardians: the limited, grainy CCTV footage of the fight in New Mexico, Loki’s ridiculous coming-out party in Germany, the Battle of New York, the attack on Greenwich only a month ago…

None of it has prepared her to be standing face-to-face with one.

She has a weakness for Asgardians. So sue her.

“You are with SHIELD?” the woman says, approaching their convoy with a soldier’s stride, a sword drawn and small shield on her arm.

May’s having a little trouble speaking, so Ward answers for her.

“Yeah…” he says slowly just behind her, the slightest inflection making his phrase a question, his own weapon drawn but not raised.

The woman acknowledges this with a stiff lift of her chin, then raises her voice, addressing all of them.
"I am Lady Sif of Asgard. Your world is in grave danger."

**Skye:**

"Wait, a real Asgardian?" Skye repeats disbelievingly, crowding in close so that Fitz can see her from Jemma’s tablet camera too. "Like, thousand years old, superhuman strength, absolutely stunning, real Asgardian?!!"

"Well don’t take my word for it, look!" Fitz says, hitting a button so that his camera feed switches to the camera on the back of his tablet, and she and Jemma both let out a squeak at the sight of the woman sitting next to him in the backseat of the SUV as it rolls through the desert back towards their plane.

"Oh my god!" Skye squeals, nearly grabbing the tablet out of Jemma’s hands. "Who is she? What’s she doing here?"

The woman glances over at the camera then, looking suspicious, and Fitz clearly tries to subtly lower the tablet, resulting in a view of his lap. "I just, ah…" He switches the feed back to the front-facing camera, which means that they see him blushing furiously, and then the surprising sight of the woman reaching across and picking up the tablet.

"Interesting," she says as she lifts the tablet and sees Skye and Jemma on the screen. "It seems to have several uses…"

The call suddenly cuts off, and Skye would certainly be laughing harder if it didn’t still hurt so damn much to do so.

"This is the best day ever," she grins, pleased to see Simmons smiling nearly as big beside her. "We’re going to meet an Asgardian, Jemma!"

"As long as no one gets stabbed through the heart today," the scientist says, standing up and straightening Skye’s blankets. "It’s quite a trend to need to break."

"Think positive, Jemma," Skye says, throwing a grin her way. "Maybe she’ll let you ask all those questions I’ve heard you and Fitz throwing around since the Berserker staff incident."

Simmons does brighten a little at the idea of that. "That would be amazing. Especially if she is knowledgeable in the fields that many of our questions are concentrated in…"

"Come on, help me get out there—I want to see her when she arrives," Skye says eagerly, attempting to take advantage of Jemma’s distracted state.

But her doctor is having none of it. "Skye!" the girl sighs, stopping her efforts.

"Jemma…" Skye whines, turning up the puppy-dog eyes. "Come on. I want to see an Asgardian, and May is *bringing one to our plane*. Don’t make me miss out…"

The back and forth continues until they both hear the sounds of the cargo ramp opening, signaling their team’s arrival. Skye only lets Simmons go when the scientist promise to come back and tell her absolutely everything and to do her best to get the Asgardian to at least *walk past* the med-pod.

She has no intention of staying in bed this whole time. But Jemma doesn’t need to know that.
May:

In hindsight, hearing that the woman in question could bend men’s wills with her voice should have been the excuse they needed to assemble an all-female team for the assault. It certainly would have gotten the job done. But it’s too late for that now.

Ward is gone with Lorelei, Sif’s enchanted collar is busted, and now their team can do nothing but scan channels and hope that Ward slips up and gets spotted by CCTV cameras soon.

It’s the middle of the night now, and May is standing in the cabin area, arms wrapped around herself and staring blindly into space as she tries to push down her memories of the last time she saw a teammate put under the spell of a girl, acting by a will not their own.

"I need your pain."

"I need your pain."

"I need your pain."

You can’t think about this right now...get it together...

“May?” She actually flinches at the nearness of Coulson’s voice. She hadn’t even heard him walk up. “You all right?”

She looks over at him, but there is nothing she can say to him because he doesn’t know. He can’t know because she never told him what happened in that building—that it was the girl controlling the men, that it was the girl who needed to die...

“Just thinking,” she says, brushing him off and turning mindlessly towards the rear of the plane. Anywhere away from questions...

She passes the open door of the Cage on her way to the staircase and ducks through it without thinking twice.

The best kind of distraction.

Lady Sif is seated on the table, her double-bladed sword across her lap as she methodically drags a sharpening stone over the blade. She lets May hold it when she asks, raising an amused eyebrow when she spins it carefully in a double turn.

“You have some experience with swords,” the woman observes with a hint of surprise in her voice, and May thinks back to her teenage years of mixed martial arts classes. Sword practice had been more of a reward for good effort during the hand-to-hand drills of the day--of course, it wasn’t a skill that SHIELD had ever demanded her to use.

“Yes...but I prefer to use my hands,” she says as she offers the sword carefully back to the woman. Something flutters in her chest when their hands brush.

“Admirable,” the warrior says, resuming her sharpening as May seats herself on the cot across from her.

You might as well see if she would let you ask...

“I was wondering if I could ask you about something,” she begins slowly, pulling out the box of questions that she’d stowed away ever since she learned from SHIELD reports and Foster’s research
about Thor and Loki and realms beyond our own…

Lady Sif smiles indulgently, though she does not look up. “You are all quite curious. Your scientists and their questions about our world’s physics and the collar, Agent Coulson and his questions about blue species…”

Well, if I wasn’t sure that Coulson knew by now…

“My question is about how you got here,” May says when Sif falls expectantly silent, trying not to seem too eager.

“The Bifrost,” Sif supplies, a suggestion of a smile on her lips as she glances up. “Ask away.”

May laces her fingers together between her knees.

Here we go…

“When people from one realm travel to another…are you also traveling across time?”

“In some sense,” the warrior answers amicably, her tone strangely light as she sharpens her sword. “Time and space are two concepts that define everything. Space is only a matter of time, so if we compress space…or bridge space, as we do…we are, by definition, compressing time.”

*Fitzsimmons would know what that meant…*

“That’s what I mean,” May continues. “Time is compressed when you leave one world and instantly appear in another?”

“I suppose one could think of it that way.”

“But you’re not traveling…out of time. You couldn’t travel back or forward in time?”

The warrior glances up, an amused look in her eye. “Our realm may be unknown to you, but every realm has to exist with its own limitations. And time is one that all realms share.”

*You’re not asking the right questions, Melinda. Quit stalling.*

“It’s always intentional, though, isn’t it? You have to want to change realms; it doesn’t just happen on its own.”

“There is a reason we have a Gatekeeper,” Sif responds, still politely, as she resumes sharpening her blade.

“Can you think of any way a person would cross time and space against her will? Your Bifrost is the only thing I’ve ever heard of.”

Sif nods once. “Just recently, when the Dark Elves arrived, it coincided with the Convergence—an alignment of the realms that had not occurred for millennia. With those circumstances, portals between realms were opened up, allowing Thor and others to move without any barrier, or control, between realms. I suppose it is possible that some of those portals are still open, though Heimdall has been watching carefully for any alarming movements.”

*This isn’t the same thing. How could you think there could be any connection…*

May looks up from her hands to find the woman staring at her, her eyes intent May’s face, reading an expression that she must have let slip. May quickly tries to get her mask back up, but it’s too late.
“You know something,” Sif says certainly. She sets the sharpening stone aside. The sword remains in her hands.

May shakes her head, her muscles tensing automatically. “No, I don’t know anything about these portals. But I have…” Where do I start…

As if reading her tension, the warrior’s fingers move slightly on the hilt of her sword, and the two blades withdraw into it. Sif sets it aside on the table, her eyes holding May’s as she folds her own hands on her knees, imitating May’s posture. Her voice is gentler when she speaks again.

“What has happened to you?”

May hesitates only for a moment, thinking of the people who could be watching through the monitors.

Ward isn’t here…if Fitz is watching...well, he was bound to find out sooner or later… if Coulson is listening he’ll probably delete the footage before anyone else sees…Skye...well...

She takes a deep breath.

“It’s not a recent thing—it’s been happening since long before the invasion last month…”

Sif leans forward slightly, her bright gaze scanning May concernedly. “Tell me. Did you find some place—“

“No. I am the place,” May says. She might as well know everything. “I travel through time and space without intention. All the time. I’ve never left this…world…but it’s been happening for years, ever since a gifted girl died in front of me. There is no special place though; the only common denominator in all the time-travel…is me.”

The woman looks genuinely perplexed, uncrossing her arms as she rests her elbows on her legs.

“I have not heard of anything like this before, in your realm or my own,” Sif says thoughtfully. “But it does seem like the kind of thing we should know something about.”

“Aha!” A voice in the doorway causes them both to jump to their feet automatically, but it’s only a sleep-deprived brunette leaning heavily on the doorway and grinning like a loon.

“Look at you!” Skye says, staring, wide-eyed at Sif. “You’re an actual Asgardian actually in our plane…”

“Skye,” May sighs, moving towards the girl. “You’re not supposed to be out of bed.”

“I was not gonna miss this chance,” the girl responds unapologetically, dodging May’s attempt to catch her arm. “Hi!” she says as she steps into the room with her hand extended towards Sif, who seems more amused than anything else. "Hi, I'm Skye--big fan!"

"Lady Sif," the woman responds indulgently, shaking her hand once, scanning Skye with a careful gaze. “You are another SHIELD agent?”

Skye grins at the woman as their hands separate, understandably starry-eyed. "Uh, no, just a consultant apparently, she answers, glancing at May. "But I'm on house arrest as long as I'm a patient, so..."

“Skye!” They suddenly hear Fitz’s voice carrying from the nearest stairwell, and they all look
towards the door just as Fitz hurries around the corner, looking relieved.

"Your computer's making all kinds of noise where you left it on your bed, which Simmons wanted me to remind you that you're supposed to be in..."

Skye's expression immediately transforms. "That might mean the program found a possible match on Ward," she says, glancing over at May, who gives her a minimal nod in response. "Okay Fitz, help me back downstairs."

She goes willingly without even a backwards glance at Sif, immediately all-agent once again.

No. Not an agent.

Not yet...

“I should warn you, Agent May,” Sif suddenly says, drawing May’s gaze to hers, “your agent Ward —“

“He’s not mine,” May interrupts defensively, restraining herself from glaring.

“Well that is certainly true now,” Sif says with a shake of her head, undeterred, “but Agent Ward is no longer the man you knew. He will not hesitate to kill you.”

May almost lets herself smile smugly. “Ward won’t kill me.”

“Do not let your feelings cloud your judgment,” Sif warns, her expression severe.

But May only lets a trace of the smile slip out as she shifts towards the door. “I’m not. He might try to kill me, but he won’t. I’ve already seen myself at age forty-five—I’ll survive this.”

December 18, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 24

They had left FitzSimmons and Skye on the plane with a couple of Specialist guards (male—stupid, stupid), and now May is kicking herself for not noticing that neither agent was in sight as they made their way back onto the plane at the Vegas airport, having just found an empty but well-used hotel room where Ward and Lorelei must have holed up last night.

“You and Ward are cut from the same cloth,” Coulson is saying as Fitz escorts Lady Sif up to the Cage where he said he put her repaired collar. “If you were Ward, where would you run?”

But then the cargo door is closing without her command, and the plane roars to life, preparing for a takeoff that she's not directing.

“If I was Ward…” May says slowly, immediately understanding what must be happening, “I wouldn’t run. I’d take out my main threat.”

Coulson looks at her, adrenaline kicking in. “You get Sif,” she orders him, turning and sprinting up the staircase. “And then make sure the girls are safe!”

She tries to approach the cockpit quietly, but it seems the other Asgardian was expecting her, sauntering out of the cockpit like she owns it. This is the first time May is seeing her, and she guesses she might be a little starstruck if she weren’t so mad right at this moment.

“Aren’t you the brave one?” Lorelei says appreciatively, sizing May up without a trace of intimidation.
“You took my plane,” May responds, raising her fists. “I want it back.”

The redhead clicks her tongue, not even hesitating in her approach. “Well, we can’t always get what we want…Actually, I can.”

May knows she’s fast, but demigods are faster. Even as she plants her foot to throw a punch, the Asgardian’s fist is cracking across her face with enough force to send her sailing over the table to thud heavily on the floor. The pain is like being hit with a truck.

_Haven't taken a punch like that since Bahrain..._

And that was also the last time she saw this blank-faced stare, the dead-shark eyes of a man brought under a powered person’s control.

“Ward,” May says with as much dignity as she can muster as she staggers to her feet. “You don’t want to do this.”

“This was the plan,” he says calmly as he comes to stand proudly by Lorelei’s side. “Cross off Sif, take the plane, eliminate anyone in our way.” He raises his pistol, pointing it at her heart. “Get out of her way.”

_Talking was useless before…but you might as well try now…_

“It’s her plan, not yours,” May grits out, not flinching from the gun. “Fight it. I know you. You’re a fighter.”

Lorelei looks between them and seems to make a connection. “Is this her?” she asks Ward, a grin spreading across her face. “The beautiful warrior with the heart of ice?”

...Is _that_ supposed to be an insult?

Lorelei tugs Ward’s head down and kisses him. May doesn’t flinch from that either.

...Is _that_ supposed to be an insult?

“No need to make this about us,” she mutters annoyedly as the demigoddess draws away and throws her a smug smile.

“Poor thing,” the woman says, stepping around her, headed for the Cage. “He told me who he desired before me. But my dear, it wasn’t you.”

May keeps her eyes on Ward, on the gun in his hands.

_You can’t let him fire it—any bullet that doesn’t hit you could burst the hull and we’ll lose pressure and everyone goes down..._

She stares down the death the knows she’s not getting today and makes her plan. Ward holds the gun on her for a moment longer before Fitz’s voice carries from the back of the plane and distracts him.

“Ward? I think we have a big problem!”

May knocks the pistol out of the way and lets him have it.

It’s not a quick fight—it wouldn’t be. Ward is strong and determined and familiar with her fighting style, but she also knows his, and she knows this plane. She does everything she can to wear him out and keep the gun away from him, but as they crash through one of the plate-glass panels in the cabin.
and tumble to the floor among the shards, she looks over to find herself looking down the barrel of the pistol once again.

“Sorry about this,” Ward says just before he pulls the trigger.

But she has the clip in her hands as she leaps to her feet. It’s over.

Ward is already apologizing as he staggers to his feet, dropping the gun amongst the glass.

“It’s me? All right?” he says, holding up his empty hands as Sif strides out with a cuffed and collared Lorelei at her side.

“He speaks the truth,” the warrior calls, catching May’s eye.

May puts a matching bruise across Ward’s face because she can’t put one on Lorelei’s

“Good to know.”

He’ll survive, Sif is taking the enchantress back where she came from, and the plane is easy enough to fix.

“I’ll run diagnostics, see how much damage we’re dealing with,” May says to Coulson as they watch the warrior stride down the cargo ramp with her prisoner at her side.

“How much are you dealing with?” her friend asks her, and she plays dumb.

“He didn’t break anything,” she says easily, but it hurts when she tries to shrug.

“Not what I meant,” Coulson cuts her off, clearly not in the mood. He gives her a knowing look.

“You should talk to him. Hash it out.”

She thinks of the days he’s spent away from the team, of the knowledge she suspects he has that she still needs confirmed. “You should take your own advice,” she returns. Preferably in one of the places I’ve bugged...

Actually, I there’s a different talk I need to have…

She hurries out after Lady Sif before the pair of women get too far away. Coulson had politely asked the Asgardian to not have the Bifrost opened on the SHIELD tarmac that they’re currently parked on.

The women are almost to a wide strip of grass between runways when May catches up to them, calling the warrior’s name.

Lady Sif turns, her hand still firm on Lorelei’s arm, and even in the dark, May can see a question in her eyes.

“What is the matter?” she asks.

But now that she’s faced with the full attention of not one but two Asgardians, May suddenly can’t remember what she was going to say.

“I…I…” she stammers, trying to remember what she came out here for.

Sif has a knowing look in her eye, her lips twitching in an indulgent smile. “What we spoke of earlier…” the warrior prompts, and May suddenly remembers.
“Right. That. I was just wondering if…”

“With your permission,” Sif interrupts, “I will recount what you have told me to those who might
know more about this…phenomenon. I might be able to learn something that could enlighten you.”

May nods. “I would really appreciate that. Thank you.”

Sif nods. “If our scientists believe that something could be done, I could return later and fetch you to
Asgaard where we could research this further—see if your situation remains the same away from
Midgard.”

_Asgard. You. Go to Asgard…_

The offer is startling, but May’s response comes easily.

“I have a team to take care of. I’m bound by my own orders, too,” echoing Sif’s words from before
she left the plane.

But Sif has a knowing look in her eyes. “Not only a team.”

May lets her confusion show on her face.

*I told you, Ward isn’t mine…never thought he was…*

But the warrior is stepping closer, a small action that makes May’s heartbeat pick up as the woman
moves just inside of her personal space. The woman towers over her, but her voice is gentle.

“I know much about duty,” Sif says quietly. "Less about love. But I certainly know of the tension
between the two.” The woman’s gaze flicks towards the plane behind May, then returns to hers, a
shadow of regret fluttering through her expression. “It is no selfishness to love your duty or to fight
for that which you love. But it would truly be a lucky thing for a warrior when committing to one
does not require her to sacrifice the other.”

May shakes her head, still confused.

*She’s got this all wrong.*

“I don’t love him. Not like that.”

_Whether she means Ward or Coulson, it’s true either way._

But Sif only stares steadily at her. “We both know it is not _him_ I am referring to.”

*Wait…*

But Sif moves just the slightest bit closer, and maybe it’s something about Asgardians, that they just
do things to her, but May can’t keep track of her own expression as Sif stands too close and not close
enough, a foot taller than May and a hundred times stronger…but the warrior is gentle as she raises
her free hand to brush the pad of her thumb carefully over the swelling bruise on May’s cheekbone.

“If you should ever change your mind, you need only speak to Thor—he can bring you to Asgard as
easily as I.”

May nearly laughs. _If only speaking to Thor was that easy._ But she only allows a small smile.

“Thank you,” she says sincerely, looking up at the woman.
The woman nods once. “Take care, Agent May,” she says, staring into her May's only a second longer before stepping away and turning Lorelei abruptly towards the darkness.

May isn’t sure if Sif actually kissed her or it just felt like she did, but she feels breathless either way as she watches the women stride onto the grass as Sif draws her sword.

“Heimdall,” the warrior calls towards the stars in a voice thick with authority. “Open the Bifrost.”

Above them, the night bursts to life with a surge of wind and color and light. And just as suddenly, it’s gone, and so are the two women.

May lets out a breath she didn’t know she was holding.

So that’s what that feels like.

She makes her way back to the plane, dodging the team in the med-pod and heading straight for the cockpit. She’s somewhat unsurprised to see Ward in there, but she dismisses him without saying much.

Sif had it wrong. This is the person who needs a shove in the right direction.

“If what Lorelei said is true, then you were more honest with her than you are with yourself.”

Ward looks away. He closes the door behind himself.

May sets diagnostics running, puts her head down on the steering yoke and finally lets all the chaos in.

Skye:

He’s saying that the drug was alien.

“Alien as in unfamiliar?” she asks slowly, watching his expression to see if he’s joking.

He’s not.

“No…I was desperate to save your life, and so I subjected you to unknown ramifications or side effects. We are completely in the dark on this.”

But Skye can only shrug, thinking of all the weird that she’s been living through for the past few months, for her entire life, really…

“That’s where we live,” she says, cutting off his flow of apologies. “I’m an 0-8-4. Who knows what the hell that means? At least we’re in the dark together.”

“Yes,” the man says, his gaze hardening, “…but not for long. We have a long list of questions I need answers for, and we are going after them ourselves.”

“Well if the team’s up for it…” Skye starts to say.

“No,” he cuts her off. “This is a powerful secret, a secret that men died for. Until we know why, we can’t share this with anyone. For their safety and ours.”

Jemma can’t know. Ward can’t know…
May can’t know.

Skye holds his gaze, knowing that she’s standing at a proverbial fork in the road.

She can follow him and potentially end up against her team, or she can say know and stay on the side of the only one she’s known longer.

At this point, she’ll throw her hat in with the one person who seems to always be on her side.

She nods.

I’m with you.

“So what’ll it be, AC? Who do we go after first?”

He points towards her stomach, the last remaining evidence of Quinn’s mercenary work. “The person responsible for this,” Coulson says, his eyes dark. “And we make him pay.”

Saying nothing about this to Simmons is easy enough when the doctor comes to check on her a little while later.

“I know I haven’t eaten since breakfast,” the girl says as she lifts Skye’s shirt to check the healing wound on her stomach before stepping back and offering Skye a hand. “How would you like to come upstairs with me and find something in the kitchen? Then you can see how badly Ward and May tore up the cabin.”

Skye would grin at the offer if she weren’t so confused.

Wait, what?

The glass has been swept up, but the cabin still bears the marks of the fight that obviously went on while she was locked up downstairs.

If the scenery looks this bad…

“Is May all right?” she asks without thinking, glancing over at the scientist.

Jemma only shrugs. “She didn’t come down for medical, but…you know May.”

But Skye can only sigh.

Do I?

May does emerge from the cockpit before she and Simmons are finished with their bowls of cereal. The woman looks battered and exhausted, but she’s walking steadily on her own two feet as she passes them without acknowledgment on her way towards the rear of the plane.

“May,” Skye says, leaving Simmons with the dishes and scurrying after her, unsure of what she’ll say but knowing that she ought to say something. “Are you all right?”

“Aren’t you supposed to be in bed?” the woman snaps without turning to look back over her shoulder.

Skye stops short, offended, but then follows May again, catching up with her as she dips behind the bar, riffling through the bottles.
“Look, I know talking’s apparently not your thing, but I can imagine what you’re feeling right now and—“

But May straightens up, a half-full bottle of something amber in her hand, her eyes flashing dangerously in the dim light.

“Stop,” the woman says in a voice that is one iota away from a snarl. She holds Skye’s gaze as she rounds the bar again, circling her until she’s headed back the way they came. “You have no idea what I’m thinking about.”

May has already made it back to the cockpit and shut and locked the door by the time Skye is able to make herself move. She stumbles back towards Simmons, who avoids her eyes in a way that tells Skye that she overheard enough to know that those words hurt. They are both quiet as they finish washing their dishes and walk together back down to the med-pod.

“I think just one more night in here,” Simmons says, helping Skye with the covers as she lies down. The action barely hurts anymore. “Do it for me, all right?”

Jemma smiles at her, and Skye tries to smile back.

“Sure,” she agrees, and Simmons perches on the bed to lean in and hug her.

“You’re doing your best,” the girl whispers over her shoulder, a knowing weight in her voice. “I think May needs it, even if she thinks she doesn’t.”

Something about those words makes the hurt suddenly expand in Skye’s chest until it feels too tight to breathe.

_May knows all your dark secrets, but what do you know about her?_

_Only that she’s always hurting, but she never asks for help…_

“Just don’t give up on her,” Skye responds in a quivering whisper, repeating the words that a Future May will one day commission to her.

Simmons pulls back and smiles, then lowers the head of Skye’s bed.

“That’s right. Sweet dreams,” she says, touching Skye’s hand once more before dimming the lights and making her way out of the pod and back towards the stairs.

Skye slips her hand beneath the pillow and pulls out the dreamcatcher, holding it up and watching it rotate on its string in the dim light. She thinks of May again, of all the anger and pain and _mess_ that she still is shielding from the sight of everyone around her…

_Someday, you’ll know. Someday, you’ll understand_, Skye tells herself.

_Just don’t give up on her yet._

---

_May:_

The half-bottle of alcohol that she puts away by herself that night still isn’t enough.

She still wakes up in Bahrain.

There are parts of her that want to throw tantrums on days like this, to beat her fists against anything
in reach and scream at the universe that *isn’t this enough yet*? But standing naked in a Middle-
Eastern street is never the right time for that.

She’s still a little drunk, but not drunk enough that instinct doesn’t send her bolting down an alley as
soon as she sees where she is. She throws herself behind an ancient car and breaks the window so
that she can snatch a blanket out of the backseat, drawing it around herself as the paws through a
dumpster full of scrap and food waste but, of course, no clothes.

She hugs the shadows on the wall when she hears a man turn off from the street into the alley,
heading for his car. He notices the broken glass on the ground before he reaches it, but not before
she’s managed to steal across the alley and slip behind him. She has him in a chokehold before he
knows she’s there, taking him easily to the ground and holding him until he stops moving.

*Sorry about this.*

She drags his body behind the car and strips his pants and shirt, yanking them on as quickly as
possible before sprinting out towards the street, knowing the worst place to wait this out would be at
the scene of her crime.

But she skids to a halt on the burning concrete when she sees herself, black slacks, white shirt, black
blazer, standing only a few feet away watching Coulson approaching a woman with a blue headscarf
draped over her blonde hair.

*No! Don’t talk to her!*

She always tries to say something. She can never get the words out. As always, it feels like a hand
pressing over her mouth, her tongue frozen, her voicebox silenced.

*The past is the past is the past is the past. You can’t change what’s already happened. You can’t…*

A dark-haired nine-year-old races in front of her younger self, touching every man in her path like a
one-sided game of tag, collecting toy soldiers for her twisted army.

*You’re mine…you’re mine…you’re mine…*

Melinda shrinks back into the mouth of the alley. Her younger self is scanning the area, looking for
signs of hostiles and overlooking the most hostile person completely. But Melinda also knows what
she didn’t see that day, what else she’ll see if she looks around the market right now.

If she stared into every shadow and corner, she’d see herself from various years in various states of
undress, sent back to this moment again and again and again, forever having to watch her own
mistakes replayed on hi-def Technicolor.

Today, May turns away.

She takes a few steps back up the alley, remembers the mess she left there, and moves back out to the
street, ducking her head and drawing her arms around herself, trying to hide in broad daylight as she
moves around the café and away from the market that’s about to become a crime scene.

*Can’t help. Can’t stay.*

She hears the crash as a table goes flying across the space behind her, and May breaks into a run,
sprinting away from the chaos, bare feet beating against the dusty ground. She isn’t far enough away
to not hear the cry of a little girl, the gunshot that took an agent’s life, and the slamming of the door
of the warehouse where her life was ripped apart. She chokes on the air in her lungs, holding back
the cry of anguish that she’s been suppressing for more than five years now, and runs.

She's still running when time finally yanks her back, meaning that her momentum sends her slamming into one of the cockpit's walls, bouncing off and thudding heavily to the floor. A glance at the sky outside tells her it's still the dead of night, which is all that matters as she curls herself into a ball on the carpet still dusted with the desert and forces herself to breathe deeply until she stops shaking.

*Get it together, Melinda. It's not the first time you've had to come back from that, and it won't be the last.*

She only bothers to dress halfway before making her way unsteadily through the dark cabin towards her bunk, locking the door before she collapses on her bed, the world around her still spinning. As she turns towards the wall and curls up again, she sees a smudge of denser darkness against the wall beside her head, and she reaches up for it even as her eyes drift shut. Suede and string and beads and feathers.

She pulls the dreamcatcher off the wall and holds it against her heart, willing sleep to come before the tears do.
This has been such a month--I've finished a semester, moved cities, and flown back to the States to visit family. Not sure how regular updates will be while I'm here, but sorry about the wait for this one. I hope seven thousand words of fluff will make up for it. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

December 19, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 24

She is startled awake in the morning by a soft knock on the door.

A few seconds of bleary-eyed blinking are just enough to make her aware of the pounding headache waiting to greet her as she blinks into dim light filtering through the window shade.

*Overslept.*

*Hangover.*

*Great.*

“What?” she mutters in the vague direction of the door, her limbs protesting as she slowly uncurls from the fetal position that she fell asleep in.

“It’s me,” she hears Phil’s soft voice filter through the door. “And I’ve got your tea.”

She sighs as she elbows herself up, *slowly* so as not to aggravate the headache. She only notices the dreamcatcher as it slips down her chest to land on her mattress, released from its hold against her heart. She nudges it under her pillow as she carefully lowers her feet to the floor.

Her head pounds when she stands, but her balance is steady enough as she takes the two necessary steps across the floor. When she unlocks and opens the door, she is unsurprised to see that Phil is already fully dressed, a steaming mug held in one hand and a concerned look on his face.

“Don’t say anything,” she warns as she turns away and moves to sit back down on her bed. She hears him slide the door shut behind himself as he steps in with her.

“You left the bottle in the cockpit and this on the cabin floor,” he responds without missing a beat, tossing her leather vest onto the bed beside her as he offers her the tea. “You don’t get to tell me not to say something.”

She can’t summon the energy to raise her head, so she scowls down at the carpet as she accepts the mug and sips it carefully.

“It’s the cheapest painkiller,” she deadpans, closing her eyes as she tips her head over the drink and lets the warm steam curl around her face.

“Well, you must be feeling great right now,” her friend sighs, sitting down on the bed beside her.
If she didn’t have a shred of pride left that makes her too ashamed to face her team until she can convincingly fake sobriety, she would have stood up and walked out right then. But she is suddenly aware of the aches in her hands, her shoulders, her face, her gut, her feet…

“Simmons said you never came down for medical,” Phil is saying beside her, and she opens her eyes again, though she keeps them directed down into her mug. “After a fight like that, are you sure nothing’s broken?”

She tries to think back to her fight against Ward yesterday, all the places where hard things hit her. None of them hurt as much as the scene she had to watch firsthand again last night.

“No,” she says quietly.

Just me.

Phil is silent for a long moment, and she guesses ‘he’s trying to decide how much more he wants to press her, or whether he’s going to attempt to comfort her.

He’s been trying to walk that line for years, and time hasn’t made him any better at it.

“Thank you for the tea,” she whispers, offering him an easy exit, if he needs one, but he clearly has more to say.

She finally glances over at him and is slightly alarmed by how sad he looks as he stares at what must be a swollen fracture on her cheekbone by now.

“You should have iced that,” he says quietly, though he knows better than to reach out to touch her.

She just looks away again, sighing heavily. There’s a lot of things I shouldn’t have done.

“We need to get the glass in the cabin replaced,” Coulson goes on, “and Ward and Fitz need to come with me to debrief…and probably stay for some tests and a few days of observation. It was mind control, after all.”

She nearly rolls her eyes as she takes another sip of her tea. “You know Ward’ll refuse—you’ll have to drag him by his ear.”

“I’ve already talked to Hill about it. If I need to call upon a higher power, she’ll back me up.”

May thinks that he probably has one more reason for wanting to get back to base—those questions he referenced when he told Skye about the alien host last night…

“Well, do you want everyone there?” she asks, glancing back over at him. “Or do we get some time off?”

He has a knowing smile on his face. “I think we all need a few days off after this mess. And you know, it is almost Christmas.”

Skye:

Everyone looks agitated and shifty as they all gather around the kitchen counter, just about an hour after Simmons had finished a final check-up and declared Skye all-clear for regular daily activity (“But no heavy lifting, no sparring, and ease back into any physical activity. Imagine me watching you do whatever it is, and if I’m scolding you in your head, stop.”) and helped move her back up into her bunk in the cabin level. Now, after breakfast and coffee at the bar with the scientists and
plenty of flack for Fitz about his black eye, Coulson has called everyone to the kitchen area.

Ward finally emerges from the cargo level, sweat-soaked after what Skye guesses was a vicious workout with the punching bag. Even May is finally out of her room, her usual, silent self even as she moves a little more stiffly than usual. There’s an ugly bruise across her left cheekbone from where the Asgardian hit her (Of course Skye watched the security footage of that fight—who would miss a chance to watch that?), but Ward has a smaller one to match, which Skye knows May gave him herself.

Some people exchange rings...

Guess this means they’re over?

“Okay,” Coulson sighs as they all form a loose circle around the same table they had served Thanksgiving dinner on just a few weeks before. “We’ll start with the elephant in the room.” He looks around at all of them while Ward looks down towards the table. “This last op was a mess, but today there’s no mind-controlling enchantress here. What happened yesterday doesn’t need to continue to divide us against one another, so I expect everyone’s cooperation in moving us on as quickly as possible.”

He pauses, and everyone nods soberly.

“Good,” Coulson continues. “For that to happen, we all need two things: First, we all need to appear for an actual debrief with HQ. This was only SHIELD’s fourth direct contact with Asgardians, so we have an obligation to provide as much information to HQ as possible. After that, Ward and Fitz will both need to stay for tests and a few days of observation, just to make sure that everything’s really back to normal.”

Ward’s eyes spark as he looks up at Coulson, and Fitz uncrosses his arms, looking alarmed.

“Sir,” the engineer attempts, “I assure you that I am completely in my right mind—“

“Let me finish,” Coulson cuts him off, and Fitz’s mouth pops shut again. “If everything’s fine, then all of SHIELD’s tests should come back clean. If we encounter anything like this again in the future, SHIELD needs to understand as much as possible in order to respond appropriately. Besides that, our team is going to have a lot of work to do together soon, and I don’t want to be wondering if two members of my team are going to be following anyone’s orders but mine. Understand?”

Ward looks frustrated but says nothing, and Fitz nods, resigned. “Understood.”

“What about us?” Skye cuts in, gesturing towards herself, Simmons, and May. “Do we have to hang around in a base too as long as these two are playing lab rats for the week?”

Coulson actually smiles then. “Once each person is finished with debrief, they’ll be free to spend the next week as they like. It’s Christmas, after all.”

Beside her, Simmons gasps under her breath, and her face lights up.

“Sir, which base are we going to?” she asks eagerly.

Coulson turns towards their pilot. “May, as soon as you’re confident that the plane is ready, set a course for Britain. They’re expecting us at the Base there.”

They land at the British base late that night, and debrief is scheduled for the next morning. Workers are also scheduled to arrive at that time to start work on the plane’s necessary repairs, so Coulson
tells everyone to pack their bags for the week that night. Simmons and Fitz are gleefully chattering about being back on British soil and visiting parents for the holiday (though Fitz, Skye learns then, already missed Hanukkah back at the beginning of the month, but his mother would be off work for Christmas like the rest of the country, so it would still be good timing if he got out of the Base by Christmas Eve). Skye listens to them talk from her own bunk as she packs, very aware of the pain lurking, ready to pounce as soon as she lets her guard down.

*It’s fine…it’s fine…* she keeps repeating to herself. *They need time with their families…I’d want that if I had that option…*

She’s already spent several years of holidays on her own.

*This is nothing new.*

She’s trying to distract herself by thinking of the chance she’s finally getting to see some of Europe without being on a mission and trying to come up with the ways she could forge a UK driver’s license and get her hands on a car for the week when she hears a quiet knock on the open door behind her.

She turns and sees May standing in the half-dark of the cabin, the bruise on her cheek nearly indistinguishable from the shadows.

“Have a minute?” the woman asks, her tone significantly gentler than it was last night.

Skye nods, cautiously turning to square her shoulders at May as the woman quietly steps in and slides the door shut behind her.

“What’s—“ Skye starts to say.

“I’m sorry.”

The apology is so unexpected that Skye doesn’t actually believe that she heard May right. She can barely do more than blink in response.

“What?” she manages, staring dumbly at May.

The woman takes a breath and exhales slowly, her hands twitching once like she’s actively holding herself still.

“Yesterday…last night…” May says slowly, holding her gaze, “I didn’t need to act like that. You didn’t do anything wrong, but I took my pain out on you, and that shouldn’t have happened. You may be getting used to my rougher side, but I’m sorry you have to keep seeing it. You didn’t deserve that…and I’m sorry.”

Skye’s own hands twitch once as she tramps down on an impulse to move across the small room and pull May into her arms. Instead, she moves them behind her body and tucks one hand up beneath the opposite elbow.

“I know there’s a lot that you don’t like to talk about,” she says, glancing away. “But I can also tell that not talking about it doesn’t make those things hurt any less. I just…”

“Can I make it up to you?”

Again startled by the words, Skye looks up at May. The woman is still holding her gaze, expression sincere.
“Let me make it up to you,” May repeats. “I know Simmons will probably invite you home with her for Christmas, and I was just going to go to one of the safehouses in the city and wait out the holiday, but…you’re welcome there too.”

Skye continues to stare incredulously at May, still unable to believe what she’s hearing.

“You’re inviting me to spend Christmas with you?” she says slowly.

May glances away as she responds. “I mean, it won’t be much of a Christmas because I don’t have a single clue how to celebrate it, and I know I’m not the best company—”

“Just the two of us? No one else?” Skye interrupts, just to be sure.

The woman looks back at her. Now Skye can see the nervousness that May’s trying so hard to hide. “Well, us, and the city of London if you want other company…”

Skye holds herself back from jumping for joy, but she lets herself grin. “Yes! God, May, yes, of course I want…I’d love to go with you.”

May actually almost smiles then, visibly relieved. “Okay. I’ll wait for you outside of your debriefing room tomorrow then. You and I should both be done by afternoon or evening. Pack light, though—just a backpack.”

May turns and slides the door open, but Skye catches her with one last question.

“You’re not taking me camping are you?” She’s slept outside enough for one lifetime—even if refusing camping means she misses a week with May, she’d almost rather stay on the plane.

But May glances back reassuringly, shaking her head. “No. We’re staying in civilization. But it’s December, and roads are a headache in England, so pack warm.”

She shuts the door again before Skye can ask her what that’s supposed to mean.

December 20: Skye is 24, May is 44

Debrief wasn’t as scary as Skye expected it might be.

The agent across the table from her had been wearing the same suit as Coulson, and though he hadn’t been quite as warm, he had seemed friendly enough. The questions are simple, and she can tell that many of them are piggybacking on what other members have already shared in their own debriefings. She herself doesn’t actually have much to share, since she never saw the enchantress herself and barely saw Sif for more than a minute. She’d watched everything on the security feeds, sure, but she feels awfully silly attempting to recount her conversation with the Asgardian to the suit across the table from her.

“What did she say to you?”

“She told me that she was called Lady Sif.”

“And what did you say to her?”

“I told her that I was a big fan…”

May is waiting outside when Skye finishes. As the woman stands up from a waiting room chair, Skye sees that the pilot is, for once, not wearing SHIELD apparel—she has a dark purple sweater on
underneath a black leather jacket with her usual dark jeans and boots.

*Oh man…*

May bends and lifts the small duffel that was waiting behind her feet, slinging it over one shoulder.

“Got your bag? All right, this way,” she says, turning without waiting for Skye and moving through the labyrinth of halls with the confident ease of someone who knows them well—who knows she belongs there. Skye follows after her, still looking around, wide-eyed, at all the new things she sees, so she almost bumps into May when the woman stops on one side of the hallway after a few minutes of walking.

There is someone sitting at a high desk on the other side of the partition in front of a wall of keys on hooks, and May slides her SHIELD ID across the counter. A small set of keys is exchanged for her signature.

“You chauffeuring me too this week?” Skye asks, smiling as May picks up the keys but lingers, waiting as the person behind the desk moves off as if to fetch something else.

“No different from what I’ve been doing for all you kids for months,” May responds matter-of-factly. She *does* smile, however, when the worker returns with two black motorcycle helmets.

*What.*

“May, are you serious?” Skye says, and she must have sounded at least a little apprehensive because there is concern in May’s eyes as she glances over again.

“Are you going to be okay with this?” she asks, picking up one helmet. “London traffic is a headache on its best days—this will get us around a lot easier.”

*May’s going to let you ride on a motorcycle.*

*On her motorcycle.*

*With her.*

Skye grins. “I’m psyched. Let’s do it.”

May stows her duffle in the compartment under the seat of the bike after extracting windproof gloves and a neck gaiter.

“You have a scarf or something you can wear?” she asks as she pulls the small accessory over her head and tucks her hair into the back of it. Skye quickly pulls a scarf out of her backpack and wraps it around her neck, slinging her backpack on as May closes the seat compartment.

“Here,” the woman says, reaching out to tuck the ends of the scarf into the open collar of Skye’s own leather jacket (her souvenir from their mission in November). Skye looks down and wills herself not to shiver under May’s touch. “Don’t want this blowing away.”

May climbs onto the bike and kicks back the kickstand, inserting the key and revving the engine before moving to put on her helmet.

“You ready?” she asks as Skye pulls her own helmet on and buckles it beneath her chin, and she nods, climbing on behind May and wrapping her arms around the woman’s waist.

May takes that as her cue and rolls them out of the garage, gunning the engine once they’re off the
base and sending them speeding of towards the city of London.

May:

Skye does all right for the long drive into town, staying huddled against May for most of the ride through the stretch of countryside between Base and the city. London is as crowded as she expected it to be with the holidays coming, the departing locals replaced by scores of tourists flocking in for vacation, and the motorcycle does its job of squeezing through traffic well.

The safehouse is just another multi-story brownstone in the midst of neat rows of identical apartments just beyond the bustle of the city’s most popular areas. May coasts into a stop in front of the correct doorway, backing the bike into a space against the curb before killing the engine.

She taps Skye’s arm, still around her waist. “You have to get off first,” she says through her helmet, and she thinks she hears Skye trying to laugh.

“Working on it,” the girl manages, her limbs unfolding slowly from around May. “Super stiff—and I don’t think I dressed quite warm enough.”

Skye manages to get off the bike without falling, and May sets the kickstand before sitting back on the seat and pulling off her helmet and dropping her gloves inside.

“What’d you think?” she asks, swinging off the bike and unlocking the seat compartment, pulling out her bag and hanging it over her shoulder.

Skye’s cheeks are flushed and her hair is mussed from the helmet, but she grins wide as she rubs warmth back into her hands.

“Can’t wait to do it again.”

The third floor of the unit belongs to SHIELD, and May punches in the code in the panel beside the street-side flat and lets the hidden scanner in the door handle check her fingerprints. The door opens onto a short hallway leading past a small kitchen to an open living/dining area, with side-by-side bedrooms and a bathroom branching off on the side opposite large, curtained windows. It’s decently-furnished; there’s a sofa and a coffee table, a small, up-to-date TV, a breakfast table with three chairs, and even an artificial fireplace filling one wall of the living room.

“Wow,” Skye remarks quietly as she follows her in. “This is a lot nicer than I was expecting when you said ‘safehouse’.”

May glances back, smirking slightly as she opens the curtains and lets the sun invade the room.

“They’re not all like this. I’ve been in some that are concrete sheds with crates of supplies and not much else. It depends on the area.”

She moves towards the bedroom doors and opens one. There’s a double bed, a nightstand with a lamp, and a short dresser. May pushes back the curtain in there too, filling the room with as much natural light as cloudy London will allow.

“There should be sheets in the cabinet at the foot of the bed,” she calls as she drops her duffle on the floor and digs out the pile of bedding before tossing it on the bare mattress. She hears Skye shuffle towards her door. “Why don’t you go ahead and make up your bed and then we’ll go out to the shops and stock the fridge?”

“May?”
She looks up to see Skye leaning in the doorway, lit up from front and behind by the fading day, glowing like an ember.

“Thanks for bringing me,” the girl says softly, an echo of a nine-year-old’s hope settling inside the peace of fulfillment. She smiles, and somehow the room is brighter.

May lets herself smile back, even if she can’t make the words come out.

*Thanks for still being here.*

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**December 21: Skye is 24, May is 44**

Skye wakes up the next morning to the sound of a kettle whistling.

It takes her a minute to understand as she looks around at the unfamiliar room, absorbing the furniture and features that are still foreign to her. Pale winter light is filtering through the curtain beside her bed, and it’s only when she rolls over and sees her backpack sitting on the dresser that she remembers where she is.

*London.*

*Safehouse.*

*May.*

Suddenly wide awake, she sits up quickly, listening for the sounds of life on the other side of her door. Out in the kitchen, the kettle has stopped shrieking, and she hears the scrape of dishes in cabinets. Skye grabs a flannel shirt off the floor and slips it like a makeshift robe over her t-shirt and leggings—the room is certainly chillier than it was when she went to bed. She pads across the worn floorboards on socked feet, opening the door slowly, unsure what she’ll see on the other side.

The lights in the main room and kitchen are still off, but May is standing at one of the living-room windows, the steam from her drink catching the gray light pouring in between the parted curtains. Her arms are bare, and Skye recognizes the black workout clothes that seem to be a staple for May.

*Of course she’s already been up.*

“Morning,” Skye calls softly, and May turns, nodding once. The bruise on her cheek seems to be healing, now an unfortunate mottle of yellow and green.

“Water’s hot,” the woman says, lifting her mug. “Your instant coffee’s in the first cupboard. And I just made some toast if you want some.”

“Thanks,” Skye says, moving towards the kitchen. She plucks bread from the toaster while stirring the instant coffee into the boiling water, moving back out to the small dining table with a dish in each hand.

“You know,” she says as she spreads butter on her bread, “you told me once that I wouldn’t want to eat anything that you cooked, but this toast isn’t burned at all.”

At the window, May huffs out a small laugh. “Toast requires pushing a button. Anything more than that and I’m hopeless.”

Skye takes a piece of her toast and her mug of coffee to the window, looking out to see what May
sees. The sky above is a thick blanket of gray clouds, but rain doesn’t necessarily seem imminent.

“So what are we going to do today?” she asks, and May shrugs in the corner of her eye.

“There’s a tube station just a few blocks away,” the woman says, pausing to sip her tea. “We can
head into town and just walk around wherever you want—as long as you have the energy.”

Skye grins into her coffee, holding herself back from bouncing on the balls of her feet.

“I’m off my pain meds, so I should last most of the day. Just don’t tell Simmons,” she warns,
throwing a smile May’s direction.

The woman turns away from her, but Skye glimpses a smile as May picks up the empty plates off the
table and carries them to the sink.

“Did you want to shower?” May asks as she begins to wash their dishes. “Otherwise, we can go
once I get dressed.”

The question makes Skye remember what she needs to ask before they go out for the day. “Hey, if I
wanted to order something online and have it delivered here, what address would I want to give
them?”

May raises an eyebrow as she shuts off the water and begins propping the plates in a drying rack.
“Online shopping? What are you after? I’m sure we could get it in a store somewhere around here.
This is London, after all.”

Skye smiles, skirting the first question. “Maybe, but you never know if it will be in stock, with
holiday shopping going on now. At least I could rush deliver an online order.”

May shrugs, moving around the table back towards her bedroom. “All right, well I’d give them the
address of the shop down on the corner rather than put this house’s address down. And use a fake
name on the order even if you use your real phone number.”

“Awesome. Thanks!”

She scurries back to her bedroom and hurriedly places the order. She already knows what size—she
checked the tag when May was in the shower last night. After punching in the address, requesting
express delivery by Christmas Eve, and leaving her cell number with its international code, Skye
smiles to herself at the order confirmation email as it pops up in her inbox.

*Should be here in time.*

“Ready?” May says in her doorway. She’s wearing her leather jacket and winding an evergreen scarf
around her neck.

Skye shuts her laptop and leaps to her feet.

“Pants first, and then we go!”

**May:**

Skye gets her first up-close view of Parliament as May leads her up out of the tube station right at the
corner of the Thames and the servicing bridge. Her reaction is one of predictable excitement, and
May doesn’t bother moving them on until Skye has taken at least a dozen photos in front of the
soaring clock tower.
Even though May has been through this city several times for various reasons, she feels the girl’s joy, if not her excitement, rubbing off on her the longer they walk around. They cover a lot of ground that day, from Westminster over to Buckingham, up to the Tower of London, where May snags a box of fish and chips for them from a food stall just outside the reach of the ravens.

“Is it still fun for you?” Skye asks as they sit side by side on a low wall and lean over the box, devouring the burning French fries before the winter air steals their heat. “The travel, I mean. You’ve been working for SHIELD for nearly half your life—is it ever just another day when you’re going to all these exciting places all the time?”

May thinks back over her years of missions before Bahrain, of the best and the worst and the wildest.

“Depends who you’re with,” she answers honestly. In the corner of her eye, she sees Skye bite her lip before her next question.

"Are we decent company?" the girl asks lightly, but May hears the question beneath the question.

*Am I?*

May lets her hand brush Skye's once as they both dip into the box of food again.

"I'm getting used to you," she says, letting Skye see her smile.

By the early afternoon, Skye has slowed down considerably and her cheeks are flushed with something that probably isn’t sunburn, so May calls it a day and leads her back to the tube station to get them back to the safehouse. On the way, she picks up an order of Indian food from a nearby family restaurant, and Skye seems to be too tired to insist that they could stay out at least through dinner.

“Simmons told me to ease back into it…” the girl mutters as she curls into a corner of the sofa while May opens containers of food on the coffee table in front of them. “She’d be scowling if she were here.”

“I’m sure she’s scowling from a distance,” May responds, offering Skye a plate of vegetable curries with rice.

“Probably.”

May passes Skye the remote as she folds herself into the opposite corner of the sofa.

“Find something that has nothing to do with world affairs right now,” May requests, digging into her food.

After an hour of Attenborough’s soothing narration on a wildlife documentary, Skye is swinging dangerously forward as she nods off a second time.

“You’d better shower before you’re too tired to stand up,” May recommends, stretching out a foot on the sofa and nudging the girl with her toe.

Skye grumbles something unintelligible but gets to her feet, disappearing into the bathroom, where May hears the shower turn on. She remains on the sofa tells herself that she’s watching the show and not replaying the day’s memories, scanning them again for any signs that Skye still felt the way she had apparently once felt as a teenager. She hasn't seen anything more than the same strange affection that the girl has always shown her.
She was a different person then, May reminds herself.

So were you, at that age.

She hears Skye come out of the bathroom a few minutes later and move to her bedroom, emerging in leggings and a flannel shirt.

“Thanks for today,” Skye says, leaning on the back of the sofa on her elbows as May turns over her shoulder to look at her. “Same time tomorrow?”

“Sure,” May agrees, and she can’t help remembering what happened the last time their faces ended up this close together. The girl smiles once, holding her gaze for a moment, but then she straightens and moves back towards her room without doing anything else.

“Goodnight,” she calls before shutting her door.

May remains on the sofa awhile longer, ignoring the fact that she feels strangely disappointed.

December 22-24: May is 44, Skye is 24

The next morning, Skye is still asleep at ten o’clock, but it's the sound of coughing on the other side that is enough to make May knock on the door with a cup of tea.

Skye looks surprised but happy to see her and makes an effort to get out of bed, but May presses her gently back into it, dismissing her protests when she feels how warm Skye’s forehead is.

“You’re taking the day off today,” May orders, perching on the edge of the mattress once the girl is seated comfortably against the headboard with the cup of tea in her hands.

“I'm fine—it’s just a cold,” Skye attempts, sniffling loudly before bringing the mug to her lips.

But May shakes her head. “Even if it’s something small, I don’t want it to turn into something worse. If I bring you back to the plane with so much as a sniffl, Simmons is absolutely going to have my head, if Coulson or Ward don’t get to me first.”

“Don’t tell me Badass Agent May is afraid of a tiny little biochemist…” Skye teases, prodding May’s leg with her toe beneath the blankets.

May raises her eyebrows.

“You didn’t see her stand up to Coulson when you were still in a coma. I wouldn’t have fought her on anything at that point.”

May goes out at lunch and again at dinner to get takeout for them, and Skye sleeps most of the day away between cups of hot soup and movies on her laptop. May forces herself not to hover, but Skye doesn’t seem to mind leaving her door propped open so that May can glance in whenever she passes her doorway. To keep herself occupied, she doubles up on her tai chi and requests updates from HQ on her teammates and the search for Deathlok, summarizing them for Skye when the girl begs for conversation.

“Not gonna lie—I know I should tell you that you don’t have to take care of me,” Skye says when May brings her another cup of tea from the kitchen after she wakes up from another nap, “but you’re doing such a good job at it that I just don’t have the heart…”
“I let you overdo it yesterday,” May responds apologetically, sitting lightly at the foot of the bed. “It’s the least I could do.”

“May, I’m in London with you at Christmas time. You couldn’t have stopped me from making the most of this even if you’d tried,” Skye attempts with a smile, but the coughing that follows her words displaces any of May’s confusion with worry.

“Keep drinking the tea,” she orders, standing up. “I’ll warm you up some of the soup.”

Skye comes shuffling out after dinner wrapped in a blanket, dropping down on the sofa beside May and tucking her legs up onto the cushion.

“Don’t put me under house arrest tomorrow, okay?” Skye mumbles, tipping over against May’s shoulder and snuggling into her beneath her blanket.

May sets her book aside and reaches for the TV’s remote.

“One show, and then you go to bed, and we’ll see how you look in the morning, deal?”

“Deal,” Skye mutters, turning her head away to cough once before settling down on her side with a yawn.

May finds a movie playing on one of the channels, an insubstantial story with forgettable characters, and Skye curls up with her head on May’s thigh, the same position they’d fallen asleep in back on the plane just over a month ago. The girl drifts off after only half an hour, but May waits until the end of the movie to wake her up and walk her back to bed, tucking the blankets around her and pretending that she’s checking for a fever when she brushes the back of her hand gently over the girl’s cheek.

The next morning, Skye looks and sounds much better, and May agrees to take her out again as long as they stay indoors more, which means they spend most of the day walking around the abundant museums and shops, squeezing around everyone finishing up their Christmas shopping or vacation sightseeing and taking in the history and Christmas bustle.

But Skye hurries them home when she gets a call on her phone from a grumpy shopkeeper who wants this ridiculously large package off his counter as soon as she can get over here to claim it.

“What is it?” May asks as Skye tips the shopkeeper “for his inconvenience” and grins as she tucks the large box under her arm.

“If you’re good, you’ll find out tomorrow,” she teases May as they walk down the street, heading for the apartment. “I have a surprise for you—will you let me be the guide when we go out in the morning?”

Red flags pop up in May’s mind, but she nods slowly.

“Where are we going?” she asks, but Skye just smiles.

“That’s kind of the point of letting me be the guide.”

The next morning, Skye has her backpack slung over her shoulder as they head out into the bustle prefacing the biggest holiday of the nation. Skye seems to be following directions off her phone as she leads them to the Tube station and through two line changes to bring them up near the river again.
The wind is cold off the river as they walk down the Thames towards the soaring London Eye, which turns slowly ahead of them. Despite the imminent holiday that night, the crowds are no thinner at the landmarks, but it seems to be early enough in the day that they’re missing the worst of it.

“So…I don’t suppose you’ve time travelled to me any more since the last time we talked, have you?” Skye eventually asks, glancing over at May as they walk.

Images of Skye in a black dress under neon lights flash through her mind. May glances over at Skye but doesn’t say anything. The girl, predictably, takes this as a no.

“Well, there was this one time that you visited me when I was living in New York at St. Agnes, and…well, you know what, I don’t want to spoil it for you. It seemed like you had a good time planning that day yourself. But we did something together that day, and I thought it would be kind of fun if we could do it again today.”

The words are vague enough that May feels herself getting nervous.

“What exactly did we do?” she asks cautiously, thinking of the last time she and a Younger Skye went out together. But this Skye just grins, touching her elbow and turning her off the river walk, just under the shadow of the Eye. Up ahead, May can hear Christmas music playing and see a strange flow of movement in the crowds. A few steps later, they’re close enough that she can see what’s up ahead.

It’s an ice rink.

Skye’s hand is still on her elbow, and she feels the girl glance over at her, her hand flexing gently around her arm.

“I…” Skye seems suddenly embarrassed. She pulls her hand away,shrugging off her backpack and opening the zipper. “That day, you took me skating, and it was the first time I’d ever been on the ice. But I could tell that you were good, and you told me that you used to skate, but when I begged you to do a trick, you said something about how the hockey skates that they had there aren’t really good for tricks, so…”

Skye pulls out what she’s been carrying around all day.

A pair of figure skates, tied together at the laces.

“Black. Because you,” the girl says, a hopeful smile as she holds them out to May. “Merry Christmas.”

May can’t speak as she stares at the offering suspended between them.

“Skye…” she says, attempting a scolding tone because how can you be willing to give me something as special as this, but the single word comes out more like a question than anything else. She looks up and meets her eyes, and the look in Skye’s eyes nearly does her in.

The girl steps marginally closer, reaching out to touch May’s arm gently again.

“That day was…” Skye starts to say, then seems at a loss of a word and starts again. “In twenty years, that day might have been the happiest I’ve ever seen you. And you…you deserve to be that happy…a lot more often.”

May doesn’t realize what Skye is doing as the girl hangs the skates around May’s neck and turns back towards the rink, tugging her gently forward.
“Let’s take them for a spin—see how they do,” Skye says, producing two tickets from her pocket. “It’s a popular rink and we can only skate for a little while, but it should be enough time for you to get your rhythm back.”

Skye leaves her standing near a picnic table to pop over to the skate rental shack, where a worker hands her a pair of hockey skates in her own size.

“We shouldn’t, Skye,” May finally manages even as Skye hurries back, skates in hand, and plops down beside May, hurriedly pulling off her shoes and shoving her feet into the skates. “What if you fall and pop a stitch? Simmons would murder me.”

But Skye just grins as she finishes lacing up her skates and climbs to her feet, thumping awkwardly over the padded walkway towards the entrance.

“Well, then I guess you’d better make sure I don’t fall,” the girl challenges, and before May believes it’s happening, Skye is joining the flow of people, dropping her shoes behind the claim desk and working her way towards the ice.

As quickly as she can, May pulls off her shoes and laces up the skates (they’re a perfect fit) before hurrying across the yard and catching up with Skye just as the girl glides onto the ice. The girl wobbles immediately, and May pushes out onto the ice after her, moving around her with ease and catching the girl’s arm in a tight hold.

Skye looks up at her, grinning and reaching up to lace her fingers into May’s. “Mission accomplished. Got you back on the ice. Now how about you show me what you can really do.”

They spend the next hour on the ice, and May feels the long-forgotten movements coming back to her like riding a bicycle, muscle memory slowly fitting itself inside her adult-sized body, both remembering and re-learning at the same time. Skye is still a beginner, but she slides along beside May with movements that slowly become more natural and practiced, though her hand remains tight in May’s the whole time.

“You want to do a run without me?” Skye offers as they near the rink’s exit. “I’ll watch.”

May considers it for a moment but shakes her head. “I’m a lot taller and heavier than I was the last time I put on a pair of skates,” she says truthfully. “Trying anything more than a spin will probably just get me another injury I don’t need right now.”

Skye smiles, undaunted. “How about a twirl, then? Or a spin, or whatever the proper term is?”

May looks out at the empty space in the center of the rink, considering it. “Come on, I’ll watch,” Skye says, breaking away and slipping out the exit of the rink, turning back and leaning against the wall to watch.

May lets herself skate lazily for a moment, considering, then makes up her mind. She stays in the flow of people around the rink but moves carefully towards the center, skating at a moderate speed. Once there’s enough distance between her and the nearest skater, she tries a forward crossover, carefully placing one skate inside the other as she moves herself in a circle around the center of the rink. As her confidence builds, she attempts a spiral and raises one leg behind her, finding her balance as she sails over the scraped-up ice. After building up some more speed, she attempts a basic waltz jump, barely a half turn, but it includes both feet leaving the ice for a small second. She pulls her momentum in by ending with a basic 2-foot spin, doing her best to focus on a
fixed point to maintain her balance, and as she finishes twirling and pushes out into a smooth glide across the ice, her eyes land on Skye, leaning against the wall and watching her with a glow in her eyes. As their eyes meet, Skye pushes off the wall and makes her way back onto the ice, and May meets her in the middle.

Skye’s hand slips into May’s, trusting and unafraid. And May feels the smile she didn’t know she was wearing spreading wider as Skye grins at her.

“So, will they do?” Skye asks, nodding down at the skates.

May glances down at their feet and looks up, still smiling.

“They’re perfect.”

Skye beams, then tugs her back into the flow of people around the ice. “Well, we only have a few more minutes here, but I looked it up, and there are actually a bunch of rinks in this city, and we’ve still got time to hit a few more before they close up for the holiday tonight and tomorrow…”

They end up at two more rinks that morning and are working their way towards a third when May feels her phone vibrating with the ‘emergency only’ pulse. She stops on the street and whips it out, frowning when she sees Coulson’s name on the screen. She holds it up so that Skye can see the name, then punches in her security code and brings the phone to her ear.

“What’s happened?” she asks immediately as the encrypted line connects.

“Merry Christmas, May,” her friend sighs. “Garrett and Triplett found Deathlok.”

Chapter End Notes

We all know what's coming next for this bunch. Send blankets and cookies. :( 
December 25, 2013: May is 44, Skye is 24

The kids were not as upset as she expected them to be by the news that their Christmas holiday was going to be cut short. Or at least, if they were, they didn’t show it.

Ward and Coulson were already on the Bus when May and Skye showed up just as the sun was going down on Christmas Eve. Simmons and Fitz arrived only a little while later, each delivered by separate helicopters (probably the first time either of their Christmases included an airlift…). By then, May had the Bus ready to go, and Coulson and Ward’s quick communication with lead agents around the world had resulted in a plan of action that’s going to cost them quite a bit of jet fuel.

The six of them had gathered around the holocom once they hit cruising altitude and watched as their leader mapped it all out for them.

“Agent Blake is on the Lumerian Star just off the coast of Ecuador right now. Hand and Sitwell are at the Hub, and Garrett and Trip are on their way in from Sydney. The Star is going to head north, Hand and Sitwell are boarding a jet right now, and we’ll all rendezvous in international waters, then get everyone somewhere as far away from the reach of a Clairvoyant as possible.”

“Did you have somewhere in mind?” May had asked, thinking of the message she’d be leaving for Fury once she was alone again.

But Coulson just shook his head. “No—I’ll let someone else call it.”

They fly through an abbreviated night until they are landing on the wide deck of the Lumerian Star close to noon local time on Christmas Day. The other agents are all already on site, and May hasn’t even made it out of the cockpit before she hears the six new passengers chattering in their cabin area. Most of them look less than thrilled to be there, but Garrett is already at work vamping between everyone, either trying to lighten the mood or just trying to push everyone’s buttons.

Coulson attempts to take charge of the meeting. “Garrett, what can you tell us about—“

“Wait a second—“ their old classmate cuts him off, “let’s not say anything until we get out of earshot of anyone who’s listening. Agent May—“ He turns toward her—“where can you fly us that is as far from civilization as possible?”

May thinks of their options, their fuel capacity, and the holiday they aren’t getting to have right now.

“I’ve got a place in mind. Flight time six hours.”

They’re airborne again and soaring due 90 degrees north when she hears a knock on the cockpit door and flips off her feed from her bugs throughout the plane.

“Come in,” she calls, and she knows it’s Coulson by the relieved sigh he lets out as he shuts the door again.

“I never realized how good we have it with our team,” he says, moving across the space between them and climbing into the co-pilot’s seat. “Everyone gets along so well—having all these senior agents on one plane almost feels like the worst of Academy all over again.”

“We get along well now,” she reminds him. “Remember how well we were getting along in Peru
“back in the summer?”

“True,” he says with a nod. “We’ve come a long way.”

She sees him reaching into the inside pocket of his coat and glances over.

“Speaking of coming a long way,” he says, holding up a small black box. “I got this approved and made when we were at the base.”

She sets autopilot and takes the box when he offers it to her, but she already knows what it is.

The silver badge is nestled in a form of black velvet, etched with a fresh serial number and newly-polished. After seventy years, they still make them all the same.

“Do you really think she’s ready?” May asks, looking over at him.

Her friend has a knowing look in his eye. “She’s met all our qualifications. For this next op, we’re going to need her to work on her own, and I trust her with that. HQ approved me to give this to her and grant her clearance before our op begins.”

May feels her mouth pulling into a small smile as she carefully closes the box and passes it back to him.

“It feels a little bit like you’re showing me a ring,” she teases, and he smiles back at her as he tips the badge into his palm and goes to work fitting it into a small leather badge folder.

“I guess it will be a proposal of sorts, but I’m not really afraid that she’ll say no.” There’s a small pause, and then he adds the question. “Do you want to be the one to give it to her?”

The mild glare she gives him comes more out of habit than anything else.

It is nice of him to ask.

“You brought her into SHIELD in the first place,” she says with a small shake of her head. “It should come from you.”

But he just smiles. “If you say so.”

They both face front again as she flips off autopilot and takes the controls back, and he finally seems to notice that night is coming on fast, despite it being early afternoon local time.

“Where exactly did you decide to fly us?” he asks, and May smirks to herself.

“I always wondered what we’d see if we flew over the North Pole on Christmas.”

**Skye:**

When they had all arrived back at the plane on Christmas Eve, Coulson had filled them in on Agent Garrett and Triplett’s latest work tracking down Mike Petersen and the Clairvoyant—revisiting the Index for candidates that had been rejected from it in the past. There were thirteen that the senior agent thought might be the person they were looking for, but Coulson had had her at work on their flight designing a method of compartmentalizing their information if teams were to go in and track down the candidates personally.

She never got the chance during the flight to go hang out with May in the cockpit, but Skye should have known it was only a matter of time before Fitz and Simmons wanted to draw her blood again.
Four days without needle-sticks was apparently too much to hope for.

“Guys, I swear, I am fine,” she insists, but the scientists can’t stop muttering about how quickly she’s recovered from being on the threshold of death only a few weeks ago. Simmons has an idea about sending some of Skye’s blood off to some of their colleagues to run extra tests, but Skye shuts that idea down immediately, remembering her promise she made to Coulson.

The team can’t know.

“If Coulson thinks it’s important that this stays between us, then we should trust him, right? He’s the boss…” she attempts with forced levity.

“So you’re saying…” Simmons says, her tone thick with disbelief, “we should obey the rules?”

“Who are you and what have you done with Skye?” Fitz asks, sounding concerned, and Skye does her best to divert their confusion with a grin.

“Skye,” she hears from the door behind her.

She looks over her shoulder to see Ward leaning in the lab’s door.

“Upstairs,” he orders. “Top brass wants to see you.”

She doesn’t know where their plane has ended up, but when she makes her way up to the cabin level, she can see undulating waves of aurora borealis outside their windows, cascading over what must be the polar winter. As she approaches the circle of heavyweight agents standing in their cabin area, Ward takes his place in the circle, but May is strangely absent. Skye recognizes Hand from their Centipede mission and even agents Garrett and Triplett from the footage she saw of her team’s last encounter with them. Coulson introduces her to Agent Blake, but when he introduces her to Agent Sitwell, she drops her gaze immediately.

Be cool, Skye—he doesn’t know you had anything to do with Jemma icing him back at the Hub...

Coulson asks her to present her plan for an op to track down people who might be their Clairvoyant, and even though her heart races at the sight of so many eyes on her, she manages to keep her voice steady. The other agents listen carefully, asking the follow-up questions. When she suggests adding a double-blind feature, it seems to impress the agents.

“I like the way you think,” Garrett says with a smirk.

“One question,” Skye says, glancing over at Coulson, “how am I supposed to access the classified files without someone in the room? I don’t have the clearance.”

“Now you do.” Coulson pulls something out of his jacket pocket and offers it to her—something small, black, and leather. “Welcome to SHIELD, Skye.”

She reaches out for it automatically, but as soon as she touches it, she realizes what it is.

Wait...really?

With trembling hands, she flips it open and stares at the badge inside.

Oh my god, really.

At the sound of footsteps approaching, she looks over her shoulder and sees May leading in Jemma and Fitz, who are both wearing wide grins.
“I told them to come up,” the pilot says, almost shyly, also smiling.

Skye looks back at Coulson, a disbelieving smile spreading across her face.

“I…don’t know what to say…” she says slowly, but decides to start with “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me,” Coulson says, smiling warmly. “You’ve passed every required exam with flying colors—“

“For a Level 1 agent,” Victoria Hand inserts coolly.

“You’ve assisted us on multiple field missions, put your life on the line,” Coulson goes on. “You earned this.”

“Hell you took two in the gut,” Agent Garrett teases from behind her, “that’s more than Sitwell here’s ever done.”

Well, he did take one in the chest, but it was an ICER...

Skye almost laughs to herself but smothers into a smile down at the badge, trying to memorize every detail of this moment. She thinks back to her accumulated Rolodex of families and homes that never lasted, thinks back to the promises made by a woman who assured her that life would not always be like that.

Someday, you’ll be part of a family that you chose...

Someday, you’ll be with us and you won’t ever have to leave...

All those years of hanging on to hope—they were all leading her here. She found May, yes, but she found this, too.

This is the place. This is them.

This is the family where you get to stay.

But they’re all agents now, and they have a mission, so the tries not to resent it when Coulson pops the precious bubble of the moment himself.

“Okay everyone, back to work.”

The senior agents disperse quietly, but Skye doesn’t make herself move right away. She is still staring down at the badge when she feels a soft pat on her arm and glances up just in time to see May passing her on the way back to the cockpit, a smile still on her lips. Skye wants to run after her and hug her, but Jemma is there too and that’s almost as good, so Skye throws her arms around her and puts all her joy into that embrace.

“Congratulations,” she and Fitz both say, and the engineer gives her a hug of his own before he and Simmons turn to head back downstairs, back to work.

Ward lingers, and Skye smiles up at him, thinking of how far the two of them have come since those awkward first few weeks.

“Couldn’t have done it without a great and very patient S.O.,” she says with a grin, and he brushes the words off.

“Yeah you could’ve. I’m no Clairvoyant—but I do think some things are meant to be.”
Skye thinks of the tangled threads that have led her here and presses the badge to her heart as she smiles once again.

*Me too.*

**May:**

Skye is at work in the Cage organizing the teams and marks and planning the mission, but Coulson has already called in to the cockpit to let May know that Sitwell and Hand won’t be playing with their team today. May is plotting their route back to the Hub when there’s a knock on the cockpit door.

*This place is Grand Central today.*

“Yeah?” she calls without moving from her seat, glancing back when she hears the knob turn.

She expects to see Coulson, or even Skye, so she’s more than a little surprised to see her old S.O. opening the door.

“Alone?” Hand asks, glancing around the cockpit.

“Not anymore,” May responds, turning back towards her navigation controls without inviting the other woman in. Hand doesn’t need an invitation, though; May hears her shut the door behind herself before crossing the small space between them and climbing into the co-pilot’s seat beside her. The senior agent was never one to make small talk, so May isn’t surprised when her first question is a loaded one.

“What did it?” the woman asks bluntly, looking across the controls towards May. “What was it that finally made you willing to get back into the field?”

It’s a conversation that they’ve never had, a conversation May had assumed had been postponed indefinitely since she left the field five years ago. The last time she and her S.O. spoke about this, Hand had still been Level 8 and stationed stateside with Maria Hill at the Triskellion. May had been six months past Bahrain, two months away from a divorce, and four months into her new position in Administration in DC. The one time Hand had visited her in the Triskellion, their conversation had been little more than a one-sided argument. May had remained mostly silent through all of Hand’s questions, accusations, and admonitions, unable to explain to her exactly why she couldn’t stay on the field anymore—one Agent knowing her secret was enough. If Hand had been another kind of woman, the encounter might have had emotions other than frustration expressed, might even have ended with May caving in and telling her S.O. the truth. Instead, May had kept her mouth shut, had taken all the woman’s anger without defending herself, and Hand had walked away more than a little disappointed.

And now she wants to know what she missed.

*What did it? What was it that finally made you willing to get back into the field?*

“Coulson,” May says calmly. It’s the simplest answer, and it’s not untrue. Fury offered her this mission to stick close to, protect, and monitor her friend, and she wouldn’t have wanted anyone else to do it.

Hand can hear it however she wants to.

Still, she feels the skepticism in the woman’s gaze as she looks over to meet it. “Worth it?” the woman asks, her tone almost imperceptibly gentler.
May holds her gaze and nods once, thinking of her oldest friend and the peace of mind she has by staying near him, thinking of the bright-eyed kids that have worked their way under her skin through the weeks, thinking of the “risk” they brought onto this plane on the first day that has turned into the strangest amalgam of joy and pain she’s ever felt…

Worth it. Absolutely, always, worth it.

Hand nods once in return, facing the front again. “You training the girl?” she asks, the brusqueness back in her tone.

May almost laughs to herself, thinking of the intensity of her aversion towards Skye in those first few weeks and the way she had nearly hurled the responsibility away from herself. “No, Ward’s been doing it,” she answers.

"As if we need another legacy of Garrett's running around," Hand nearly groans. "You ever going to take on a junior agent?" she asks, glancing over. "You've got a legacy to protect, you know."

"I thought Maria was playing Jacob to my Esau," May reminds her coolly, referring to the prodigy that Hand had taken under her wing once she had moved off the field and into full-time command."Hopefully, she already has her own projects that she's grooming for command."

Hill had always belonged more to Fury than anyone else, but May and Hill's mutual connection through Hand had brought them into more direct contact in previous years than might have happened under ordinary circumstances. Though their paths rarely crossed once May moved into Administration, she and Hill had maintained a strange relationship that hearkened more to step-sisters than anything else. Hill had outranked May for several years and technically been her boss for most of them, and it had been easier to simply let their connection fade after Bahrain.

"She might, but there's always a need in SHIELD for more agents like you," Hand reminds her, her sharp tone disguising a rather touching compliment. Of course, the woman doesn't give May time to dwell on it.

“Agent Coulson—how is he?” she asks.

May glances over, letting her surprise show, but her S.O. looks as cool as ever.

“He went through a trauma last month—did he bounce back all right?” the woman asks, still not looking at May, who narrows her eyes.

“Not all traumas are created equal,” she says carefully.

She sees Hand barely raise one eyebrow. “Neither are all agents.”

May isn’t sure that those words were meant to be an insult, but she takes them as one.

“Would you rather I dropped you off here?” May threatens half-heartedly, nodding towards the icy expanse of ocean sliding beneath their plane. “I’m sure you could have a ship pick you up within the hour.”

“Nice talking to you, too, Agent May,” the woman responds with a glint in her eye, unfolding her six-foot frame and climbing out of the seat, ducking under the controls to make her way back towards the door. “Enjoy your hunt for Santa Claus.”

May rolls her eyes, considering giving the plane a little tilt just to make Hand stumble once, but holds herself back.
In some ways, she really has missed having that woman around.

“And Melinda?” Hand suddenly says from the door, and May looks back over her shoulder, startled by the rare use of her first name.

Hand glances around the cockpit before meeting May’s eyes, a tiny quirk in her mouth that barely imitates a smile. “It’s nice to see you back where you belong.”

December 26, 2014

Skye:

The next afternoon, they’ve dropped Hand and Sitwell at the Hub and picked up a quinjet to carry on their plane back to North America. One of the pairs of agents—Ward and Trip, she’d decided—will be investigating an Index-reject in the UK, so that pair will be taking a jet directly from the Hub. Now, they’re soaring back across the Atlantic with Garrett and Blake still on the plane, and Skye is carefully laying out the plan for their missions once they land.

In the interest of mixing things up, she’s put Coulson and May on separate teams, but May seems about ready to throttle Agent Garrett every time he opens his mouth, so Skye’s decided to pair him with the longer fuse of their team.

Garrett himself seems friendly enough as she passes him a phone loaded with the coordinates of his team’s assigned candidate.

“We haven’t officially met,” the older man says, taking the phone but offering her his other hand across the table. “John Garrett.”

He asks how she’s feeling since getting shot, smiling at her response. He tells her about some of his own injuries over the years, even tugs down the collar of his turtleneck to show her an extensive burn along the base of his neck.

Skye thinks of the scars she’s seen across May’s body and realizes that she’s already starting her own collection.

That’s what happens to field agents.

“Sir, I know what you did for me,” she says, “how you risked your life to save me. So thank you.”

“You’ve got a good team around you,” Garrett says, brushing off her gratitude. “I just jumped on the bandwagon.”

“Well, you trained one of them, sir,” she says, smiling. She can see some of the resemblance between the two men, even if Ward’s personality is nothing like the man in front of her.

“Guess it all comes full circle,” Garrett says with a nod, leaning back in his chair. “Ward’s your S.O., I was his…turn, turn, turn. But this S.O. thing goes both ways. You’ve had a big impact on him. He’s different than I remember him.”

Skye looks up, surprised. “Different how?”

“The thing about being a Specialist,” Garrett says, dropping his eyes towards the table, “being alone. A team? It gives you a whole new perspective. Guess it’s the difference between fighting against something and fighting for something…or someone.” He glances up, eyes locking with hers.
“Ward’s got that now.”

There is something about his gaze that makes her sure that he means it exactly the way she hears it.

She doesn’t say another word the whole time he’s in the room.

*Shit,* she thinks as she goes back to her computer and preparing the phones for the missions. *Shit. Shit. Shit.*

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**December 27, 2014**

**May:**

She should have known this would all go to shit.

Between getting the plane docked in Atlanta, getting into the lab to check up on what FitzSimmons have been doing with Skye’s blood, and trying to get a bug in the quinjet that Coulson and Garrett are taking to their mark’s location, she had only remembered at the last minute to get a pair of Specialists assembled to guard the three kids on their plane while all the field agents scattered.

Her and Blake’s field backup was on standby just outside of the little town of Macon…and that itself should have been red flag number one.

Finding no one at the desk of the assisted living center where the Index-reject Thomas Nash was listed should have been red flag number two.

But the gunshots ringing out around the corner when she went to find the home’s director were certainly red flag number three.

She sprints down the stairs to the sound of six gunshots and rounded the corner just in time to see Deathlok bringing his cyber-enhanced leg down on Agent Blake with a sickening crunch.

“May to Hub!” she shouts, pressing the comm in her ear while she raises her own gun. “Deathlok’s here! Agent Blake is down!”

She hears Hand ordering in their backup as she fires two ineffective shots at Petersen, then dives for cover as she sees him raise his arm and activate some kind of rocket-launching appendage on his forearm. The missile brings a section of wall down on her, and she curls into a ball beneath the dust and drywall, protecting her neck and ribcage until everything stops falling. She smothers a cough and lies still, straining to hear if Petersen is moving closer, but instead hears the sounds of his robotic leg moving quickly away.

“Agent May! Report!” Hand is demanding in her ear, and May uncurls her body, shoving debris off herself and scrambling to her feet.

“Deathlok is on the move!” she says as she staggers to Agent Blake’s motionless body and falls to her knees beside him, feeling for a pulse. “Agent Blake is alive but likely critical—orders, please,” she demands.

“Backup will form a perimeter and attempt to trap Deathlok in the city. Stay with Agent Blake—medical is on its way,” her old S.O. commands. “All other teams are in route now. Rendezvous at your plane once Blake is safe for transport.”

Medical takes eight minutes to arrive, and May counts them off with Blake’s pulse beneath the
fingers of one hand and her weapon beneath the other. She can hear sirens in the distance when her comm suddenly crackles with a voice that definitely isn’t Hand’s.

“May?” Skye’s voice says in her ear. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” May answers automatically before she processes what she’s hearing. “Skye, how did you get on this frequency?”

“Come on,” the girl says dismissively, hurrying on to her next question. “Did you really see Mike? Is he okay?”

“I think he’s broken Agent Blake’s spine—“

“Is he okay?” Skye demands again. “You didn’t shoot him, did you?”

“ICER rounds were doing nothing—he seems to be fine,” May snaps back, hearing the sirens wail up outside. “Get off our comms—I need to talk to Hand.”

Hand orders them all back to the Hub, and Coulson and Garrett’s plane docks on their Bus over the Atlantic. Trip and Ward are already back from the UK, and they march onto the plane behind Hand after Blake’s gurney has been wheeled off to surgery.

“This shouldn’t have happened,” Hand says harshly. “Backup should have been there alongside agents Blake and May. The plan was flawed from the start.”

“The point is,” Coulson interjects, cutting off any retort from Garrett, “that we have an agent down and a suspect—Thomas Nash.”

They compromise with a new plan, leaving Simmons at the Hub with Hand to prep the field teams that will now be accompanying any future assaults of Petersen or their suspect. Coulson inspects Blake’s effects while Skye runs research on Nash past him and May until Coulson discovers exactly which of the six rounds Blake fired at Deathlok.

Five ICER rounds.

And one tracker.

December 28, 2014

May:

They track Mike to Pensacola, Florida—to a racetrack, of all places. Field teams meet them at the airfield, and the whole team is assembling, spreading out between the vehicles.

May glances over where she sees Skye loading up her computer and an ICER into the same bag that she’d hidden a pair of figure skates in. Barely a month ago, the same girl was bleeding out on the floor of a wine cellar.

They can’t count on another miracle this time.

Coulson is strapping on a Kevlar vest in the cargo hold when May marches up to him.

“I don’t want Skye or Fitz on site,” she says without preface. He acknowledges her with a raised eyebrow but doesn’t stop her from continuing. “We made this mistake already—taking the kids into a hostile situation. In Italy, we didn’t know any better—this time, we do. Leave them on the plane.”
Coulson doesn’t say no, but he doesn’t say yes either.

“We need Fitz on site—he’s running the Dwarves to case the place,” her leader says. “I don’t want to make Skye stay on the plane alone while we all go out. But once Fitz has deployed the Dwarves, I’ll leave them both in the van with plenty of protection nearby. Fair?”

“Fair enough,” May concedes.

Skye:

Ward and Coulson are both being overprotective and refusing to let her enter the building that the tracker’s leading them to, so she’s stuck waiting out the op in the van, watching the feeds from Fitz’s Dwarves with an armed field agent waiting over her shoulder.

She hates being out here while her team goes into danger, but at least she feels somewhat useful, condensing the observations from the seven little bots into everyone else’s comms. But one of them suddenly gets a hit on someone in the building who’s not carrying a gun, and Skye hits the back-scattering function on the bot’s camera.

Mike is covered with hardware. His leg, his head, his eye, his back, his arms—there’s little of him left that hasn’t been mutilated with machinery.

“What the hell did they do to him?” she whispers, not meaning to let it go into everyone’s comms.

Ward’s the one who finds him first, and Skye’s heart shudders when she hears gunfire and an explosion through his earpiece.

“Ward? Are you okay?” she demands into her microphone.

He coughs once. She thinks she hears debris falling. “Two men down—we need a med team!”

Skye’s already on it, dialing with one hand on a traceable line.

“Requesting one now. May!” she says quickly as she looks back up at the monitors. “He’s coming your way!”

May:

Deathlok doesn’t come easy, and they’re all eventually racing down to the lowest levels of the structure. The super-soldier escapes down into the sewers, but Fitz’s confused voice still filters down into their comms.

“Sir, there’s someone else down there.”

May catches up with Coulson and Garrett in a room full of monitors and a motionless man in a wheelchair.

“There are no traps here, Agent Coulson,” a computerized voice is saying, the words appearing on one of the screens facing the invalid. “You are here because we are destined to meet.”

The other screens are showing feeds from various cameras, some of which appear to be in the eyes of other people. Ward and the remaining agents close in a circle around the wheelchair-bound man, whose face also seems immobilized, though his eyes remain active, taking in every person in the room.
“You’re the Clairvoyant?” Garrett asks skeptically, sizing the man up.

“I’m Thomas Nash,” the computerized voice corrects him. “Mister Poe gave me that other name. A bit dramatic for my taste.”

May keeps her gun held in rigid arms, watching the man carefully.

This is who we’ve been chasing? This is the man who Raina and Poe and Quinn took orders from?

“Now I understand why I couldn’t see you after you died,” the voice says, sounding satisfied, “because you yourself could not see. You were simply a broken man who didn’t know he was broken,”

Coulson turns from the wall of screens, looking skeptically at the man. “You’re one to talk.”

“Let’s pack this freak off to the Fridge where he belongs,” Garrett suggests, and May hears the levity he’s plastering over his unease.

“Agent Garrett,” the voice says, “look at me. Do you believe you can confine me any more than this chair?”

“Can someone please tell me how we turn that stupid voice thing off?” the senior agent mutters, looking around at the other agents.

“I will join Raina in your prison, Coulson,” Nash goes on, “but I will see you wherever you go. Just as I saw you holding Skye in your arms, dying, bleeding, knowing it was all your fault.”

May’s stomach clenches, and she forces herself to breathe evenly as she keeps her eyes fixed on Coulson, waiting to see his reaction.

Her friend steps directly in front of Nash, though, leveling him with a glare that could have cut through steel. “You’re going away,” he says evenly. “We’re going to stick you in a little box where no one will ever see you or hear you ever again.”

“I see you’re angry,” the voice says, “head clouded with lies. You’ve been betrayed, and now you fear what’s about to happen.”

Coulson doesn’t even flinch. “Nothing’s about to happen. Just more empty threats from you.”

“No, it is the inevitable. A force beyond your comprehension is coming for you. You and Skye. She has something we want and she will die giving it to us. I have seen it.”

May’s fingers flex around her gun, but she watches with bated breath as Coulson takes a step towards Nash and leans over until they are eye-to-eye.

“Go to hell,” he snarls.

Nash’s tone never changes. “No matter where I go or what you do to me, I will always—“

A shot rings out.

May spins with her gun pointed at the sound and sees Ward standing stock-still, a smoking pistol pointed at the bullet-hole in Nash’s chest.

Stunned silence descends over the monotone of Nash’s heart monitor.
“Wait, what just happened?” Skye’s stunned voice finally says in their comms as May moves across the room and takes the pistol carefully out of Ward’s hand. He surrenders it without a fight, but he doesn’t look at her or Coulson. Just drops his gaze to the floor and passes over his rifle too.

Coulson lets May walk him up and put him in the car. She doesn’t touch him.

And she doesn’t need to ask to understand.

_This is the danger of getting attached._

Her phone vibrates with a secure message after she shuts the door of their SUV on Ward. She punches in her code and decrypts the message, then turns to deliver it to Coulson where he’s talking to Garrett.

“Director Fury’s back. He’s waiting for you at the Triskellion. You can talk to him about what’s been bothering you.”

“A lot’s bothering me.”

_Skye:

Everyone is silent on their way back to the plane, everyone seeming to still be processing the shocking turn of events of their day. She hears that they put Ward in the Cage for their flight back to the Hub, but they’re cruising at thirty thousand feet when she finally goes in to talk to him.

She doesn’t want to know…but she knows that she needs to.

“Why’d you do it?” she asks, sitting down across the table from him.

“I lost it,” he says simply. “I got angry. He pushed all the right buttons.”

“Coulson says the mission was to capture,” Skye reminds him, “not to kill.”

_You shouldn’t need to be reminding him of that…_

Ward leans forward, his dark eyes intense on hers. “Think about what the Clairvoyant said,” he whispers, his voice fine and filed. “What he’s done. Think about the Centipede program. How he experimented on innocent people like Petersen. How he kidnapped and tortured Coulson. How he ordered Quinn to shoot you. And he wasn’t gonna stop, Skye. Not until you…” and then Ward finally cuts himself off, but Skye knows what he wouldn’t say. “I wasn’t gonna let that happen.”

_Because of me_, she thinks, the truth closing around her heart like a vicegrip. _He would have killed Petersen too, if he’d had the chance, and it would have been because of me…_

_Goddamnit, Ward…_

“So what happens now?” she asks, staring down at her hands.

Ward shifts back in his chair, looking away. “I face a SHIELD review board,” he sighs. “Whatever the punishment, I’ll take it. I deserve it. but I do not regret what I’ve done.”

Skye looks up, letting him see her disgust. “You don’t?”

“No,” Ward says firmly. “Not if it means you’re safe… You and the rest of the team.”

But the pause in the middle was just a little too long, and she gets up and leaves without another
word.

Goddammit, Ward.

She goes back to her bunk and pulls her computer onto her lap, still her go-to security blanket for situations like this, when everything is too much. The windows open on her screen are those of the psych evals that she had spent their flight back to the Hub (and then back to Florida) looking at, searching for ways to read their enemy’s mind, as Coulson had said. She hadn’t found many connections, but the most striking thing about the psych evals is just how extensive they are.

Curious, she uses her newfound clearance to see if the Agent evaluations are the same, pulling up the Level-1 access version of Coulson and Simmons’s personal files. The evaluations are a lot more than mini-biographies—there are personal details, habits, tendencies, struggles…it’s all there. All in one place.

And all a person would need would be security clearance.

She takes a couple of moments to organize her thoughts, then sends the files to her tablet and goes up to Coulson’s office.

He’s leaning on his desk, visibly sulking, but he seems willing to talk when she asks if he’s worried about Ward.

“I’m worried Ward killed the wrong man,” Coulson says, not the words that she was expecting. “Nash never spoke. The computer spoke for him. How do we know he was the one controlling it?”

Skye stumbles to catch up. “Are you saying Nash could have been pretending to be the Clairvoyant?” she asks slowly.

But Coulson shakes his head. “I’m saying Nash could have been a prop…”

“…and now he’s dead,” Skye finishes, cold dread threading through her chest.

Ward might have killed an innocent man...

“He could still be out there…” Coulson says quietly, “in our heads…”

She sees her segway and takes it.

“Or in our files.” She holds up her tablet when Coulson looks up, confused.

“When you told me to check the psych evals, you said ‘read his mind.’ Ward said the Clairvoyant knew how to push all the right buttons—“

“Raina did that to me too,” Coulson adds, nodding.

“Did she mention your father’s death?” Skye asks, softening her tone respectfully. Her leader looks up at her, surprised, and she hands him her tablet. “Your psych evaluation called it a defining moment. These are not just personality tests—they’re surveillance on every agent. Pictures, stats, who you visit, where you like to eat…”

“Dinners at the Richmond,” Coulson says, almost to himself. He looks up at her, the connections he’s making showing on his face. “He’s been monitoring us. Think about it—the Clairvoyant only knew you’d be at Quinn’s villa—“

“…after I dropped a tracker. And the only thing he’s had trouble seeing is what happened to you
after you died--"

"...because Director Fury wouldn’t release that file to anyone."

They stare at one another, the truth slowly sinking in.

*It’s so simple, in the end…*

"The Clairvoyant doesn’t have abilities,” Coulson says slowly, “he has security clearance. He’s an agent of SHIELD.”

She looks at her director, asking with her eyes the inevitable next question.

*What do we do?*

He nods once. “I’m going to talk to Ward. You go tell the rest of the team.”

Skye hurries down the stairs straight to the lab, but Fitz isn’t in there. When she rushes back up to the cabin level, though, she almost crashes into Fitz scrambling away from the cockpit area.

“Fitz! I was just looking for you.”

“What!” he almost shouts. “I didn’t do anything!”

“What?” she snaps, “I didn’t say you did…” Then, because of course he did, “What’d you do?”

Fitz stammers out a lame excuse for a moment before finally giving up. “Why would May—“ He abruptly drops his voice to a whisper, glancing furtively over his shoulder. “Why would May have an unauthorized encrypted line in the cockpit complete with a thumb-scanner? It isn’t in any of the plane’s specs.”

“Wait, slow down,” Skye says trying to smooth out a topic she wasn’t expecting to hear, “An encrypted hardline?”

“Yeah!” Fitz says breathlessly. “She’s not supposed to have that. Who’s she talking to?”

Skye feels her insides suddenly turn to ice.

*Impossible. She couldn't be…*

*She wouldn’t be…*

There has to be an explanation. But this is no time to be cautious.

“Cut the line,” she orders. “Now.”

Fitz rushes away towards the cargo stairs, and Skye dashes to the Cage. Coulson and Ward are both shouting when she opens the door, but Coulson steps out immediately when she tells him that they have a problem. As she recounts to him what Fitz just told her, his face goes almost white.

Coulson reaches into his jacket and pulls out his pistol, ejecting the clip of ICER rounds and switching it with another clip from his pocket.

“You said you’re ready to do whatever’s necessary,” he says, snapping the clip up into his gun. “I hope you still mean that.”
He looks up at her, and Skye knows he’s offering her the choice.

There has to be an explanation for this, she tells herself again. She can’t be the Clairvoyant. She wouldn’t have ordered any of these things. She wouldn’t have…

But Skye knows what she’s promised. She’s a SHIELD agent now, and he’s her leader.

And from the beginning of all this, Coulson is the one who has always been on her side.

“Give me an ICER,” she says calmly.

She’s not completely sure who she’ll be shooting with it, but May can’t die today.

There’s too much left to be done.
December 29, 2013: May is 44 and 13, Skye is 24

May had known exactly who was to blame when her encrypted line went dead mid-call, and she had taken her ICER down to the lower level after Fitz.

If this secret has to come out today, it only needs to come out to one person at a time—get to him before he talks to anyone else...

But Fitz has locked himself behind the lab doors before she could catch up to him, and her ICER rounds had burst uselessly against the bulletproof glass.

On the other side of it, Fitz stares at her in disbelief, as if he can’t believe that she actually pulled the trigger.

May glares at him and sighs, taking a step forward.

Okay, here we go...

Above her, Phil’s voice rings out, and she raises her gun automatically.

“Put it down!” he shouts, his glare and his gun both pointed down at her. “Put it down, May!”

“It’s not what you think, it’s just an ICER,” she says levelly.

What did Fitz tell him? What does Coulson think?

“This one’s not,” her friend says calmly. “It’s real, with real bullets. So you better put yours down and tell me what the hell’s going on right now.”

He knows better than to fire a gun in the plane. He wouldn’t dare...He wouldn’t shoot you...

But she stares back at him, reading the ferocity in his gaze, and realizes that today, he just might.

She exhales once. “I—“

“Now!” he shouts, his pistol still pointed at her heart.

But she shakes her head hopelessly. “I can’t.”

Skye suddenly appears from the shadows beside her, pointing her own gun...at her. “You better listen to the man, Agent May,” the girl says, her voice barely trembling. She doesn’t look apologetic, but she does look the tiniest bit scared.

For whom?

“You have no idea what you’re doing,” May says slowly, directing her words at Skye, obviously the one less committed in this situation.

The girl doesn’t flinch, though. “Maybe not, but I know you’re not fast enough to take us both.”

You’re the one who taught her to get used to pointing a gun at a person...May reminds herself. And we are not about to risk three bullets in a cruising-altitude plane...
For a silent, suspended moment, she considers their options.

_You have your orders. Fury outranks Phil every time. You're on your way to the Triskellion—the Director can explain everything himself. Give them just enough information to make it that far._

_But not with the kids in the room._

May carefully unclenches her left hand from her gun and puts it up, tipping her pistol away from everyone, though she doesn’t take her finger off the trigger.

_Here we go…_

“Look,” she says slowly up at Phil, “I can explain everything but _not here._”

But his voice is still harsh when he snaps back. “Why not here? You have to check with someone first? Using that encrypted phone in the cockpit?”

She shoots a glare at Fitz.

“Who’s on the other end of that line, May?” her friend demands.

“I can’t say,” she says levelly.

_Not with the kids in the room._

“That’s ok, I think I know. It makes sense now…”

And then he lays it all out for her, and she understands the rage in his eyes.

He thinks she’s the Clairvoyant.

_No…no…he’s got this all wrong…_

But suddenly, the plane jerks with a direction change that sends them all stumbling. By the tilt, she guesses from that they just made an eastbound turn.

_I left it on autopilot towards the Triskellion—what's happening?_

Coulson is the first one to get his gun back on her as he grips the rail above her for balance.

“What did you do?” he demands. “Where are we going?”

But she can’t confess to this, even if she wanted to.

“I don’t know! I didn’t do it, Phil!” She doesn’t even realize that she’s shouting. “I don’t know what’s happening here, I swear!”

“If you’re not doing it, who is?” he shouts back. “Drop the damn weapon and kick it over to the stairs!”

She glances down, forcing herself to release her white-knuckle grip on the gun. She sets the safety and obeys. Skye shifts to stand between her and Fitz, her gun still held in rigid arms, as Coulson quickly descends the stairs and picks up May’s gun, slipping it into his coat pocket.

“Talk,” he orders once they’re all standing on the same level. “Tell us where you re-routed the plane.”
“I didn’t set this new course, I swear,” she says with all the sincerity she can get into her voice.

“Don’t lie to me!” Coulson shouts.

“How is this happening then?” Skye asks, the calmest of the three, and May directs her answer towards her.

“HQ can override control of the avionics to take us anywhere they want. Let me check the instrument panel and I’ll be able to—“

“No way!”

“You’re not going anywhere until you explain!”

“It’s not me!”

“Why did you have an encrypted hardline?”

“And tried to shoot me when you found it?”

They’re all four shouting now.

“Let’s take a breath,” May finally says, realizing that she can feel her pulse getting too high and there is only one thing that could possibly make this situation worse...

“Let’s not!” Coulson snaps, but May makes herself do it anyway. She breathes deeply once, closing her eyes.

She has lost control of her mission.

She’s lost control of her plane.

And unless she gets at least one back under control, she’s at risk of losing control of herself.

Make the hard call.

“It was a dedicated channel,” she finally says slowly, her voice as level as she can make it, “to Director Fury. That’s the truth.”

“Director Fury?” Coulson repeats. “I haven’t been able to get him on the line for weeks.”

“You were reporting to him?” Skye says disbelievingly.

“That’s all I can tell you,” May sighs, throwing up her hands.

All three of them shout something at her, and she throws down her last card.

“I’m under orders!” she shouts at Phil, trusting him to understand. “Fury will tell you.”

“Was this an order?” Fitz demands, pointing at the burst ICER rounds on the glass. “To shoot me in the bloody head?”

“Hang on,” Coulson interrupts. “We’re not headed to Director Fury anymore.”

“I don’t know where we’re headed,” May says, letting the desperation creep into her voice, hoping it will remind Coulson that she’s still here to pilot. “And I can’t get Fury on the line because Fitz cut the line!”
“Skye told me to!” the engineer shouts back underneath Skye’s own defense.

“Someone’s been talking to the Clairvoyant. The real Clairvoyant!” the girl says, still looking panicked.

Which raises another question...

“You want to explain why you were in the walls, Fitz?” May demands, turning her focus on him. “Why you were tampering with the plane’s sat cable?”

Fitz nearly rolls his eyes. “Sure, because that’s relevant. Don’t try and turn this around on me!”

But Coulson does turn towards the lab, switching his gun to the other hand to keep it on her.

“Fitz?” he asks, much more calmly, a pointed look at the engineer.

Fitz sighs. “I was trying to speak to Simmons at the Hub.”

“You needed an encrypted line?” Coulson repeats. “What’s so secret?”

“Well, you tell me! Simmons and I know you two have been whispering,” Fitz sighs, gesturing at Coulson and Skye, “keeping things from us about the drug that saved your life. Simmons is just trying to figure out how the whole thing works!”

The alarm bells in May’s head are blaring so loudly that she can barely hear her own voice.

“Fitz…who is she talking to?”

Skye:

Coulson shifts over to the lab doors, his gun still pointed at May.

“Fitz, open the door,” her leader orders. “Skye, get your laptop hooked up to our systems. See if you can pull up any SHIELD communications. I want to know where this plane is headed and why.”

“Coulson…” May begins, raising one hand.

“You stay put!” he nearly shouts.

Skye lowers her gun and shifts towards the door, shrugging at Fitz.

Well, we started this. Gotta do something.

He punches the button to open the doors, looking defeated.

Her three teammates have barely moved when she gets back to the Lab with her computer under her arm. Fitz has moved as far as possible into the lab, away from May, who is still standing, looking stricken, with Coulson’s gun pointed at her.

Skye gets connected to SHIELD’s scanners, but she cringes and yanks the earbud out of her ear when it fills with screeching static.

“Noise,” she mutters, pulling up her decryption programs and setting them running on the mess.

“What do you mean, noise?” Coulson demands.

“I mean literally noise across every SHIELD communication channel,” she answers shortly. “Some
sort of blanket signal. Or coded data.”

Coulson turns to May. “You want to fill us in? We root you out, suddenly our plane switches course and our communications are jammed.”

May looks totally overwhelmed, and her voice sounds desperate. “I don’t know what’s happening. I wish I did. You have to believe me.”

“No, I don’t,” Coulson responds coldly.

Suddenly, a man’s voice filters through the static. “Do you read, 616?”

“Where’s that coming from?” Coulson asks.

Skye leans closer to her screen, triangulating the signal. “Close.”

“SHIELD 616, do you read? Enemy aircraft, on my tail!”

“Garrett?” Coulson calls towards the laptop, still not lowering his gun.

“Coulson, I’m under attack. SHIELD drones are on my ass and we’re not getting along. Do you copy?”

“Copy,” Coulson responds. “Garrett, what’s happening? We’ve lost control of our aircraft.”

“Hell if I know. Tell me you’ve got guns on that thing. I’m coming to you.”

Coulson looks quickly around at the three of them, clearly debating which battle he’s going to fight first, and Skye realizes what’s about to happen only a second before it does.

He pulls the trigger.

Skye’s heart stutters in her chest as an aborted exclamation tumbles out of May’s mouth and she crumples to the floor.

No, no, no…he can’t have…

But it’s May’s ICER that Coulson sets on the table as he moves to her elbow. She hadn’t seen him switch guns.

Thank God…

“Fitz, can you manually wire the controls to the guns to bypass our systems?” Coulson asks in a voice that sounds much too calm for this situation.

Fitz looks even more shocked than her, and it takes him an extra moment to answer.

“If I have cables long enough, yeah.”

“Skye, decode the signal—we need to get ahead of this. I don’t want any more surprises today. Fitz—this first.”

Coulson pulls out a pair of hand restraints, the kind with a bar instead of a chain between the cuffs, and Skye tries not to stare as he snaps them on May’s motionless wrists before he and Fitz lift her between them out and carry her of sight.
Skye gets herself set up with the holocom upstairs once she hears Coulson and Fitz busy themselves shooting down the drones chasing Garrett’s plane. By the time the senior agent has docked on their craft and tumbled down their stairs, she’s close to deciphering the message.

“I saw your trajectory,” she hears Garrett saying as she stares at the scrolling symbols on the big screen. “You’re being tractor-beamed straight to the Hub. Those drones were launched out of there for sure.”

“Victoria Hand?” Coulson says, and Skye tries to fit this new information into their theory.

Hand…May’s old S.O.

*She’s the Clairvoyant?*

Skye keeps her eyes on the scrolling code on the screens while Coulson fills Garrett in on their theory, how the Clairvoyant must be a high-level SHIELD agent. Despite what Skye thought was the man’s general distaste for Hand, Garrett actually defends her.

“Hand is definitely a hardass and a buzzkill at parties…” he says amicably, “but if she’s been hiding in plain sight all this time, why reveal herself now?”

The decryption suddenly completes, and Skye gets their attention.

“Guys.”

The letters fall into place one at a time.

*Out of the shadows into the light.*

And then, like some gruesome signature, five more letters fall in at the end.

*H*

*Y*

*D*

*R*

*A*

*May:*

She wakes up with a gasp to the sight of the honeycomb pattern of vibranium above her.
One move tells her that she’s in extender cuffs. One deep breath tells her Coulson’s ICER round hit her right in the chest. One more second tells her she’s not alone

“Coulson says you’re an informant,” a horribly judgmental voice says beside her. “Want to elaborate on that?”

“No, I don’t,” she replies with a grimace, managing to maneuver around her bindings to get herself into a sitting position against the wall. Ward is seated in a chair with his arms folded across his chest, blocking her into the corner.

“I deserve to know,” he says coldly, but May shakes her head.

“Don’t start with that,” she grumbles, exhaling around the pain in her ribs. “We do our jobs, end of story.” He, of all people, should be able to understand that. “I can’t tell you any more until Fury gives the go-ahead.”

Ward is shaking his head slowly as he stares down at her, smiling coldly. “You’re good. I always heard you were good, but man. Playing us this whole time, conning me, Coulson—”

“I wasn’t playing anyone,” she snaps. She doesn’t owe him any explanation, but he’s the only one so far who has given her a chance to talk. “I had your backs.”

“And reported on us behind them,” he cuts back levelly. “You always said to keep my emotions in check, but this is some next level—“

“You should’ve listened,” May snaps, remembering the reason he’s in this room in the first place. “You killed a man in cold blood. Let your emotions get the best of you.”

Something sparks behind his eyes. “It was to protect our team from a monster—“ he says, louder now.

But she’s loudest. “It was to protect her!”

If he’s surprised that she saw right through him, he doesn’t show it. The cold mask drops back into place, but May keeps staring him down.

“Which would’ve been okay,” she sneers at him, “if you hadn’t shot the wrong guy.”

The plane suddenly shudders, and she can tell they’ve gone into a vertical landing. A moment later, Coulson opens the door, ignoring Ward and focusing at her on the floor.

“Fitz repaired your direct line,” he says quickly, and she can’t tell if he’s actually scared or she’s just imagining it. “If you have any ability to make this right, now’s the time. Because you can’t make it worse.”

He hauls her up by the shoulder of her vest and marches her through the cabin, leaving the Cage’s door open behind them. She passes John Garrett—oh you’re back?—and sees Skye working on the holocom where five enormous letters are displayed on the screen.

HYDRA.

Confusion crashes over her. “What’s happening?” she demands, trying to look over her shoulder at Coulson. “Hydra? What’s—“

“Save it,” he snaps. “You’ve got one job right now, and that’s to get Fury on the line.”
By the time she’s opening her cabinet in the cockpit, their Bus is rocking with explosions as someone—*Hydra agents?*—takes out their plane’s guns.

“I have orders not to do this with anyone else present,” May mutters, glancing over at Coulson in a last plea.

But he is stone-faced. “Get director fury on the line, or I’ll march you out there first.”

She picks up the phone and scans her thumb over the reader.

“Agent Melinda May,” she says carefully into the receiver. “Voice command—Emergency protocol one.”

The phone rings three times before a man answers.

“Hello?”

It doesn’t sound like Fury. Not even close.

“This is an X10 straight connection to Director Fury’s personal line,” May says slowly, her eyes locked on Coulson’s. “Where is he?”

There’s a long beat of silence before the voice on the other side responds.

“Director Fury is dead.”

The bottom falls out of her stomach just as the windscreen behind her suddenly explodes. She doesn’t know if it’s flying glass or a bullet that rips through her arm, but the sound is immediately sucked into a vacuum, and suddenly she’s crying out into the silence of a darkened room, tumbling to the floor and clutching at her arm as pain sears through it. As she processes the carpet beneath her skin and the vague shapes in the darkness, she immediately tries to clamp her mouth shut, realizing what has just happened. She hears the sounds of someone shifting on a mattress, fumbling in the darkness…

A lamp clicks on, and she sees a younger version of herself sitting up in bed.

“Jiejie?” the teenager gasps, confusion instantly morphing to panic when she sees the blood on her arm. “What’s—“

“Meimei, go get Mom,” Melinda interrupts, clamping her hand tightly around her bicep even as she feels blood seeping out between her fingers. “Just get mom and tell her to bring her med kit…”

Her younger self doesn’t need to be told twice—she’s already moving, scrambling to the foot of the bed and dashing out the door of another bedroom Melinda hasn’t seen in years.

Alexandria.

1984.

*I was 13 or 14…*

She starts to stand up but ends up sinking back down to the floor, drawing her knees against her chest as she leans back against the twin-sized bed and trying to slow down her breathing.

*Fury is dead. The plane is under attack. HYDRA is taking over SHIELD…*
What is happening back there?

She raises her head when she hears feet shuffling down the hallway, opening her eyes just as her mother and younger self hurry into the room. Her mother flips on the room’s overhead light, and Melinda squints into the brightness as the woman approaches her.

“Where?” her mother asks bluntly as she kneels beside her, and Melinda carefully uncurls her hand from her arm. Her mother doesn’t react to the amount of blood, just turns quickly to the wide-eyed teenager hovering over her shoulder.

“Melinda, go boil a kettle and find some clean cloths. Bring them and a bowl of the water once it’s clean.”

The girl nods, still a little transfixed as she takes two slow steps backward.

“Sometime today,” her mother snaps, and the younger girl jumps before turning and hurrying back down the darkened hall.

“I suppose you’ll be used to all this eventually,” her mother mutters, opening the med kit on the floor beside her and pulling on a pair of sterile gloves. “And when are you here from?” her mother asks, finally meeting her eyes.

Melinda isn’t sure if she’ll be able to answer, but the word comes out. “2013.”

That makes her and her mother the same age at this moment.

Her mother sniffs, lifting her arm carefully and turning it in the light to observe the damage. “You bring a knife to a gun fight?” she asks, a knowing look in her eyes as she examines the wound.

“More or less.” May sucks in a sharp breath as her mother palpates the wound carefully, clearly feeling for debris. “There won’t be anything in there,” she says quickly, and her mother glances up, surprised. “Nothing foreign goes with me when I travel. Bullets, shrapnel—they all get left behind.”

Her mother has something like a smirk on her face as she reaches for her bed kit and riffles through it. “So you did grow up to be an agent,” her mother says, knowingly. “CIA?”

May turns her head away and closes her eyes, unable to speak for more than one reason.

Can I even say that I work for SHIELD anymore?

She hears the sound of small feet shuffling down the hall, and she opens her eyes to see her younger self, still decades away from the mess she just left, come back into the room with a bowl and a pile of cloths held carefully in her hands.

“Sit it there, Melinda,” her mother orders, pointing to the rug beside them. The girl carefully sets the water down, and her mother immediately grabs one of the cloths and dips it in the water. May manages not to flinch as her mother carefully cleans around the wound, then lays one end of the cloth over it, compressing it gently.

“Stitches won’t go with you either then?” her mother says, glancing up for confirmation, and Melinda shakes her head.

“What happened, Jiejie?” Meimei asks as she crouches beside the two of them, still looking stricken. “Was it an accident?”
Melinda turns her head and stares over at her younger self, remembering how this night had felt from the other side—how she had spent weeks after this event coming up with possible scenarios that could have led to a bleeding adult version of herself tumbling back into 1984, and Melinda tries, even as she knows it’s impossible, to get a warning out.

*Stay away from SHIELD. Don’t go into this business—be something normal that will keep you as far away from all this as possible.*

“Just another day,” she sighs, turning her head away. She feels her mother looking at her knowingly, her gaze somber.

“When you get back to wherever you came from,” her mother says, “make sure you get this flushed out and keep it clean—you ought to tape it closed if you can’t stitch it.”

Melinda smiles, even as she feels herself slipping away, and reaches for her mother’s hand.

“Thank—”

And then she is tipping onto a different floor, one covered with thick shards of windscreen glass, but nothing is exploding anymore. She catches herself with a hand against the wall, but she sees her clothes laid out to cover as much of the floor as possible, a thin barrier protecting her bare body from the glass.

“Get dressed,” a quiet voice orders, and she looks over to see Skye sitting against the closed cockpit door, an ICER resting on her knees and pointed at May. “They’re not shooting at us for now,” the girl says, “but you’d better get dressed fast so that we can get out of here.”

May catches her breath and shifts onto her knees behind the pilot’s chair, gathering up her bra and shirt. “Skye—“

“No,” the girl cuts her off, a quiet syllable that doesn’t carry much in the way of anger but sounds sharp nonetheless. May holds her gaze, but Skye just shakes her head, gesturing with her gun. “Fury’s dead, HYDRA’s taking over SHIELD, the plane’s disabled, and Hand, Simmons, and Trip are somewhere inside. So just get dressed, and let’s get out there and figure this out.”

Skye stays where she’s seated and waits silently as May pulls on the rest of her clothes, attempting to stay tucked out of sight behind the chair. For the first time, something about this action feels shameful, which might be why she attempts again to defend herself as she pulls on her shoes and shifts across the floor to Skye.

“Look, I have orders…it wasn’t—“

“I’m not the one you need to convince,” Skye interrupts, shifting her arms to show May what is in her other hand—the extender cuffs, open and waiting.

“Hands,” Skye says.

May shakes her head, trying to put all the earnestness she can into her expression. “You don’t need those.”

But Skye cocks her gun, still pointing it at May. “Maybe not. But I have my orders.”

May’s arm burns as she lets Skye snap the cuffs on.

Coulson is not gentle when he slices off the sleeve of her shirt to check and bandage her arm, and
she is not gentle as she tells him the truth. She confesses as much as she can—Fury’s plan to bring him back, his concern that knowledge of the truth would drive Coulson to madness, the memories implanted, the team she assembled around him in case the worst should happen…

“But I have nothing to do with the Clairvoyant or this HYDRA threat we’re up against…” she finishes, trying to get him to look at her as he wraps the bandage around her arm.

He finally meets her eyes, and she wonders if he is scrolling back through everything she has said to him in the past few months, re-examining them for traces of the truth he now knows. “I want to believe you,” he says with a sigh. “But you’ve used that against me this whole time.”

They’re safe in here for now because Hydra clearly wants to preserve the plane, but a surgical strike team is next, so they need to get somewhere else, fast. Skye is backing up their intel onto a portable hard drive while Garrett and Ward throw together a plan that should get their people back and give them an opening to get out. May watches them move around each other gathering guns and gear, nearly useless behind her bound hands. They have no idea what’s waiting in the Hub, so they’re all dressing for battle, and May’s arm burns as she clumsily pulls a Kevlar vest out of the lockers and throws it at Skye as she works on her computer.

*She’s not taking one more bullet for us.*

No one puts a vest around May, and she figures that’s fair.

**Skye:**

Saving Simmons and Triplett and getting out safely are priority, so their team splits, with Skye and Ward heading to the control center to disable their systems. They use ventilation shafts to skirt most of the action, emerging in a broom closet as close as they can get to the control center. Their destination is at the end of that hall, and Ward asks for her ICER to pave the way for her.

“It’s suicide!” Skye insists. Twelve soldiers may not be a hundred, but it’s more than she actually believes he can take on by himself. She can tell he’s trying hard to play it cool, though.

“Not if I don’t die,” he replies with a paper-thin smile. “And if I do,” he goes on, his voice turning somber, “I think I deserve to. I killed an innocent man, Skye.”

They don’t have time for this, but Skye knows too much about self-loathing to let that go by. “You didn’t know,” she reminds him. “You thought you were doing the right thing. You thought he was going to—”

“…to hurt you,” Ward finishes, confirming again exactly what she doesn’t want to hear.

*Goddamnit, Ward.*

She can’t say anything. But she does put her gun in his hand.

He pauses at the door, both weapons held ready. “If we make it out of this, maybe we can grab that drink?”

She remembers Dublin, their deferred talk that already feels like a lifetime ago, back before he and May...

“I didn’t want to talk back then,” he’s saying, “I needed to keep things compartmentalized…”

“Like with May?” The words slip out unintentionally, and she hopes they didn’t sound as painful as
they are.

He seems a little disarmed by her words, and she guesses that he really had no idea that she knew. But *this isn’t the time and place for this*, so she waves the words away.

*We might be about to die, after all…*

“When we make it out of this,” she says slowly, looking up at him with all the kindness she can muster, “yes, let’s have a drink.” She puts one hand on his shoulder, then, impulsively, tugs him down by the strap of his vest and presses a solid kiss to his lips.

*If he dies today, it might as well be with one good memory.*

When she pulls back, she thinks she can see him holding back a smile.

“Lock the door behind me,” he orders as he raises his gun and hers.

Two deep breaths, and she opens the door for him to throw himself out of it, straight into harm’s way.

He doesn’t die. They plant the bomb.

It detonates and the whole world shifts.

**May:**

There is no room left in her to *feel* any of this if she wants to stay in the present, but there is a growing part of her that doesn’t want to.

The cuffs are off her wrists and on Garrett’s, and Simmons and Trip are out of harm’s way. Ward and Skye emerge safely out of the dust, and Ward and Trip show both ends of the spectrum when SHIELD soldiers march Garrett past them in handcuffs. Trip shouts profanities, the pain of the betrayal immediately bursting into flames, but Ward looks more like a house in a quake—collapsing inwards as the foundation crumbles.

May doesn’t even try to convince herself that she doesn’t feel the same.

“How deep does it go?” Coulson had asked Hand as the truth finally descended on them.

The look on Hand’s face had nearly undone her right then.

The Hub had been purged, and May had stood behind her team and watched dozens, hundreds, of agents file past them in handcuffs. She recognized some of them. Some, she knew well. Even worse is the knowledge that the same things—maybe even worse things—happened or are happening in every SHIELD base today. But she doesn’t have a margin to feel worse right now. Not when there is now so much work to be done.

When the dust is finally settling, she drifts back onto the plane. Glass covers every inch of carpet, a blast pattern put there by people who, until yesterday, she had trusted with her life. She thinks of the war raging outside this base and the foundation that’s been taken out from under her and every loyal SHIELD agent. She thinks of her Director, fallen, and how she failed the last mission he will ever give her.

She stands on the fragments of her purpose, breathing through the broken reality around her and holding herself very, very still.
Interlude, III

Chapter Notes

One last flashback before the big finale, kids. We're almost there!

November 7, 2004—Skye is 14 (almost 15), May is 46

Skye closes her notebook and stands up from the table, making her way around the other teenagers and over to the woman sitting in a chair against the wall monitoring the ground-floor study hall.

“Finished,” Skye says, holding out her book to the nun, who smiles as she bookmarks her page and takes the proffered notebook.

“That didn’t take you long,” Sister McKenna says as she opens Skye’s notebook to her math assignment and scans down the page of equations, checking them against the answer key on her lap.

Skye shrugs, watching as the woman’s red pen remains on her table, unused. They did Chance and Probability in their math lesson today, and Skye had found the lesson one of the easiest by far.

“Reading?” the woman asks, handing her notebook back to her, and Skye nods.

“Pages 94-119,” she answers, referring to her assignment for English class tomorrow.

Sister McKenna nods. “All right, you’re done for today then,” she says with another smile, marking something beside Skye’s name on her roll sheet.

“Can I go to the library?” Skye asks quickly, rocking back and forth on her feet. She hit her thirty-day mark last week, and the neighborhood library is one of the off-campus places she is now allowed to go. She’s not really a bookworm, but they have computers with Internet there, and sometimes there are classes that are free to sit in on.

Sister McKenna nods, picking up her book again. “Remember to sign out at the front desk and be back by dark.”

Skye nods as she tucks her notebook under her arm and makes her way out of the room where a few of the other residents of St. Agnes Group Home are still working on the day’s school assignments. It’s her first homeschooling experience, and Skye has to admit that it’s not her least favorite thing. Everyone at this home is coming in at different levels and with different needs, so getting to work form her own starting point has been helpful. The schedule isn’t bad either—all the residents have to be downstairs for breakfast at the same time every morning and then report to study hall right after, but once the day’s assignments are done, they’re free for the rest of the afternoon, as long as they’re back by 7pm.

The home isn’t too interesting on it’s own—there’s a game room with a foosball table and an ancient game system and a small library of books, but Skye’s first thirty days here, when she wasn’t allowed to leave the grounds yet, had been so boring that she’d nearly run off that first month. It’s a teens-only home, but the residents are only allowed to be upstairs during the afternoon if they leave their bedroom doors open so that the resident carers know they’re not breaking any rules. From what Skye
has seen so far, this rule just results in a lot of stealing between rooms and some of the kids going out to parks or less savory spaces if they want to smoke or have sex…but Skye figures that’s their business. She doesn’t want to get in trouble—she just wants something to do.

One of her three roommates, Lariesha, is dozing on her top bunk as Skye quietly slips on her coat and packs her backpack for an afternoon out. She’s pulling on her second-hand sneakers when she hears Lariesha roll over and lean over the edge of the bed.

“You going by the Corner?” she asks in a soggy voice, referring to the convenience store at the end of their block. Skye nods, and Lariesha squirms for something in her pocket before offering Skye three dollars.

“Two cans of Coke and a Snickers on your way back?” the girl offers. Skye nods and pockets the money, then picks up her scarf and waves goodbye as she moves out the door.

Three dollars is more than those items will cost, and she knows that means that she can keep the change as long as she comes back with the older girl’s requests. Their relationship isn’t really a friendship, but it does finally seem to be one of cautious trust, both of them tired of fighting every person in their path.

Skye signs out at the front desk and is buzzed out the front door, a metal-grated, inner-security number that is just a little too reminiscent of a correctional facility. Once the door swings shut behind her, she stops at the top of the steps to stand in the sun and put her scarf on.

It’s barely November, so the weather is still pretty pleasant, but Skye has found that the more clothes she wears, the less attention she receives. The temperatures are hovering in the 50s this week anyway, a last gasp of autumn before the inevitable descent into the long winter. This is the farthest north Skye has ever lived, and though she remembers cold winters from other homes in other states (a cold Nebraska day when May gave her the List still stands out in her memory), she’s not looking forward to a long New York winter.

Skye tucks the scarf into the neck of her coat and closes her eyes, focusing on the warmth of the sun on her face.

May.

The last time she saw her time-traveler was back in the summer, when she had woken up in a hospital with a bandage around her wrist and May wearing Skye’s clothes and standing at her bedside. Skye had tried her best to be hateful, to say all the words that she hadn’t been able to throw at her after two years of not seeing the woman, and May had taken everything in silence, visibly distraught. Skye had wanted her to get mad right back at her so that she would be justified in her anger, but May had just listened, had followed Skye’s words with a long silence and then a heartbreaking apology. She hadn’t made any excuses, but she had made promises, promises that she was going to do better, that there were more dates on the List that she had in the future that Skye had written with her own hand, and that she when she finally met May in the future, Skye would be…good. Or at the very least, better.

It isn’t fair, Skye thinks for the thousandth time, to not have any say in this.

It’s not that she wishes she were still suicidal as an adult…it would just be nicer to know that her future isn’t already set. It’s pressure, in some ways. Pressure to meet an unseen goal. Pressure to not give up. And from the way May talks about it, it’s impossible to change a future that is already someone else’s past.
A yellow cab rolls to a stop in front of St. Agnes, so Skye quickly descends the steps down to the street, turning left on the sidewalk and heading up the street towards the library. She doesn’t want to see what other unfortunate soul is getting dropped off here today.

“Mary.”

The voice makes her freeze in her tracks, but she doesn’t believe it until she turns around and sees it.

May.

The woman is standing on the sidewalk a few yards away, closing the door of the cab, which quickly rolls off down the street. She’s wearing clothes that look like they belong to her, and there are shoes on her feet that don’t look like she pulled them off a homeless person. For half a second, Skye wonders if she is finally meeting present-day May, but before she remembers that that doesn’t make any sense, she processes that May actually looks older than usual. And as May stands, unmoving, on the sidewalk and stares across the space between them, Skye realizes that May actually looks uncomfortable. Like she doesn’t know how this is about to go.

_She thinks you might still be mad at her._

Skye raises her chin and turns fully towards May.

_Well if that’s how she thinks you should feel, you might as well be._

The steps she takes to close the distance between them are measured and careful—_Don’t look desperate._ She doesn’t smile, but she doesn’t take her eyes off May, staring her down as she approaches. Closer, Skye can discern the small differences in the woman’s appearance—May’s hair is grown out longer than usual, hanging several inches past her shoulders; there are lines around the woman’s eyes that Skye doesn’t remember noticing before, as well as the faintest glimmer of silver in her dark, wavy hair. May’s eyes are the same deep brown, but they are also darting over Skye’s face and body as she approaches, taking in every detail, as if May is looking at her for the first time.

Skye stops on the sidewalk just out of arm’s reach, and May waits, but Skye doesn’t know what to say.

“What are you doing here?” she finally says, not smiling.

May holds her gaze. “I wanted to see you.”

The reply, concise and explicit, almost makes Skye smile.

“Did you jump a tourist for the clothes?” she asks, glancing down at May’s outfit again.

The woman doesn’t reply to that, but she does take a half-step closer.

“You’re finally taller than me,” May breathes, a disbelieving smile tugging at her lips as she looks up at Skye.

“I’ll be fifteen next week,” Skye says without thinking, and May finally smiles, drawing a breath like she’s about to correct her, but then thinks better of it.

“Where are you going right now?” May asks, glancing at the backpack slung on Skye’s back.

“The library.”

“Do you have to go?”
She's letting you have the power here, Skye realizes, and she thinks through her options.

You could say yes and say you want to go alone.

You could say “Yes” and “please come with me”.

Or you could quit pretending like seeing her isn’t the best thing that’s happened to you in years.

Give her a break.

Skye lunges forward and throws her arms around May, and though she seems to have caught the woman by surprise, May is already hugging her back, arms tight around Skye’s ribs, squeezing her so tightly that Skye wonders if May knows her own strength.

If hugging her means a cracked rib, though, she’ll take it.

It’s literally been years since their last one.

Skye feels tears pricking at her eyes and buries her face in May’s neck, pressing her skin against May’s and trying to hold onto at least a little bit of composure. When she finally tries to say something, she can only get a whisper out around the lump in her throat.

“I missed… I…”

May’s hands are smoothing slowly over her back beneath the backpack. “I’m sorry, Mary,” she whispers. “I’m so sorry—“

Oh. She doesn’t know yet...

“Skye,” Skye says, raising her head and leaning back a little but not pulling away. May looks up at her, her hands falling to rest on the shoulder straps of Skye’s backpack. Their faces feel too close, but not so uncomfortable that Skye wants to move.

“You don’t have to—” May starts to say, but then tries again with a different sentence. “You can give yourself any name you want…”

But Skye is shaking her head. “I can’t though, can I?” she says with a shrug, still not backing away from May. “You called me that in the hospital, and I’ve heard you trip over my name more than a few times in the past, and I don’t think I want to be called Mary anymore anyways. You called me Skye, though, because that’s the name I’m going to go by when we meet someday, aren’t I?”

May still has a smile on her face as she shakes her head slowly, then finally shrugs. “I don’t know if you can’t choose a different name, but I guess it would be better to say that you won’t. Didn’t.”

“Well, I like the name,” Skye says, finally remembering that they’re still standing in front of St. Agnes, in full view of anyone inside. She quickly lowers her arms from May’s shoulders and takes one of her hands, turning and continuing down the street shoulder-to-shoulder with May. “I don’t know if I would have come up with that name on my own, so, congratulations, you named me,” Skye ends with a grin.

“No, I named you that because you chose to call yourself that,” May adds, huffing out a laugh. “Cause and effect get pretty convoluted when there’s time travel involved. Did you decide on that
name because I called you that, or did I call you that because that’s what you decided to be called?”

Skye chases that rabbit in her head for a moment, then sighs.

“You could have called me anything and I probably would have chosen that name.”

Beside her, May shrugs.

“I never get to know what could have happened. I just know what did.”

When they reach the next intersection, May stops and faces Skye.

“If you have to go to the library—“

“I don’t,” Skye says quickly, smiling. “And my curfew isn’t until 7 pm.”

But May is smiling too. “Then, Skye, can I take you out for your birthday in an inadequate attempt to make up for the fourteen other birthdays of yours that I have missed?”

Skye raises an eyebrow. “You have money?” she asks. “Because I certainly don’t.”

But May is flashing her the corner of a wad of cash that is tucked into the front pocket of her jeans. “I’m good for it,” she says, grinning as she sees Skye’s eyes get wide. “Now show me where the closest subway stop is.”

May doesn’t tell her where they’re going as she looks at the maps in the subway station, she just pays the fare and leads her to the right platform.

“So you’re still from the future,” Skye asks in a low voice as they wait for their train, “but you’re obviously a lot more put-together than you usually are.”

May glances over, smiling in understanding.

“I didn’t show up at your place,” she says, answering the implied question. “There’s a place around here that I stayed for about a year at one point in my life. I time-traveled there a couple of hours ago and at least was able to get everything I needed there. But when I saw the date, I got a cab over to your home as quickly as I could.”

“So you still keep clothes and cash at this place?” Skye asks, raising her eyebrows. “Even though you lived there years ago? Or did you just take the current tenant to the cleaners?”

May just smirks as their train rolls in, bringing a gust of air with it.

“I’d rather hear about you,” she deflects as they board a train.

So Skye tells her. She fills May in on the months between the hospital where they last saw each other and now—a week in the hospital in Pennsylvania, not even returning to her former foster home and being driven straight to rehab out in Connecticut until September, being moved up to the city and into St. Agnes once she completed her recovery course, about the time September hit.

“I wish for the love of God they would just quit moving me between states,” Skye mutters as they wait out another stop, passengers shuffling around them on the subway car. “It makes no sense whatsoever—if they wanted me far from my last family, why not just move me to the next town? But
no…every few months it’s another new city…”

May looks away. “It’s not for no reason, Skye,” she sighs.

*That’s new.*

“Wait, you know something about that?” Skye says, rounding on her. “You’ve *known*?”

May looks over and meets her eyes. “I know, but I can’t tell you,” she says simply. “That’s not what happens.”

“How about ‘blink once for yes and twice for no’?” Skye presses, only half-joking, but May gives her a look that is its own answer.

“Okay, okay…” Skye mutters, glancing away and tightening her grip on the pole as the train moves off again.

“How many kids are there in your group home?” May asks as she leans on the opposite side of the same pole while the train sails along in the dark beneath Manhattan.

Skye doesn’t really want to talk about St. Agnes, but she wants to keep talking to May.

“Twenty to thirty at any given time,” she answers with a shrug. “Some are only there for a few weeks before being placed in foster homes. Most of the people who stay are people with *Issues*, like me.”

“Do you get along?”

Skye shrugs again, thinking of the three other girls she shared her bedroom with. She’s the youngest of all of them, and even though Lariesha has her moments of kindness, they generally don’t say much to one another—all of them just want to be left alone. The last person Skye had really connected with was her (one) roommate throughout rehab.

Kat had been sent there for a suicide attempt as well, though hers had involved a drug overdose. She was two years older than Skye and wasn’t an orphan, but she hadn’t seen either of her parents in years and had mostly been staying on her aunt’s sofa since she was ten. When her (older) girlfriend had asked Kat to run away with her, she had said it. When the girlfriend had taken all their money and the car and skipped town with a different girlfriend, Kat had taken what seemed like the only road she had left.

Kat had been a good roommate--quiet and kind. She had let Skye curl up on her bed with her and listen to her Walkman with a headphone splitter that she still had, even though she only had four CDs and Skye didn’t have anything to share with her. They had kissed once, while Kat was packing up her things on her last morning there, partly to say goodbye and partly because Skye had been wanting to know whether kissing a girl would feel different than kissing a boy, which she had done before but hadn’t been too impressed by.

It *had* been different.

Nicer.

But they never got a chance to do it again.

“Next stop,” May says, jolting Skye out of her memories.
Skye sees a sign for 103rd street as she and May join the flow of people out of the subway and up the stairs towards the exits. The weather is still pleasant as they step out into the street again, and May seems more certain of her direction as she leads Skye down the block.

“Where are we going?” Skye finally remembers to ask, catching up to May and slipping her hand around May’s arm.

“I’m starving,” May says, turning suddenly off the street and into a pizzeria, “and I’ve missed New York pizza.”

“So are you going to tell me about when you lived in New York before?” Skye asks as they step into a small but warm restaurant.

But May only shrugs as she scans the pizzas available by the slice in the case. “I worked here for about a year when I was younger. Can you find us somewhere to sit?”

Skye grabs them a table by the door and shrugs off her scarf and coat while May stands in line to order at the counter. When she comes back and sets a tray with one slice of each pie on the table, Skye’s eyes get wide.

“Like I said,” May says, looking totally unembarrassed as she sits down across from Skye, “I’ve missed New York pizza.”

They barely make a dent in the mountain of food before Skye is full, but she’s still impressed by what they accomplish. They’ve never actually eaten a meal together before, she realizes after her first slice, so she had no idea how much food May could put away on her own.

“Eyes bigger than your stomach,” Skye teases when May finally stops eating, the tray still laden with five giant slices of pizza.

“We’ll bag it up and you can save it for later,” May explains, still shameless. “Pizza keeps for about a day out of the fridge, especially if the day is cold.”

Skye nods. Maybe she can share it with her roommates when she gets back tonight.

“Do you feel better?” May suddenly asks, and Skye looks up and sees May staring at her wrist, which is resting on the table between them. Her sleeve has slipped up, and she knows May can see the scar, still fresh and pink, an open wound the last time the woman visited her.

Instead of answering, Skye pushes both her sleeves up past her elbows, turning her arms over and showing her forearms to May. Her left arm still looks like a well-used scratching post, but all the lines on her skin are a few months old, and besides the scar on her wrist, her right arm is bare. She hasn’t put a blade to her skin since she left rehab.

She sees May’s hand start to move towards her left arm, but then the woman stops, looking up with a question in her eyes.

“It’s okay,” Skye says, raising her arms slightly, and May reaches out to trail her fingertips gently over the scars. Skye watches her and wonders if May will still be able to see them on her arm when they meet in her present day. A moment later, she touches her right wrist, tracing the short, brutal scar.

“I don’t spend every day thinking about how I wish I was dead,” she eventually says in answer to May’s question. “So yeah, I guess I feel better. I think I’d be lying if I said I’m happy, or that I don’t want out of the life I have all the time. But I do think I can make it now, which I know is progress.”
“You will,” May says certainly, lifting Skye’s right hand to her cheek and pressing her lips to the scar on Skye’s wrist. “You will.”

The gesture is so unexpected that Skye doesn’t know what to say as May sets her hand back on the table between them. Fortunately, May takes that moment to stand, picking up the tray and taking it to the counter for a to-go bag. When she comes back, she zips the sack into Skye’s backpack before putting it on her own shoulders while Skye shrugs her coat back on.

“Let’s go see what else we can find,” May says, offering Skye her hand, and Skye takes it as she stands up and follows her back out into the daylight.

May leads them across the street and into Central Park, where most of the trees are already dropping a rainbow of foliage onto the paths. Skye kicks up swells of scuffling leaves while May asks her more questions about the last few years (the ones they didn’t get to talk about when they saw each other in a hospital). Skye answers and tries hard to ignore the way that she can still feel May’s cheek under her hand.

Skye doesn’t know how far they walk, but at one point they round a corner and see an ice rink spread out in the valley between some of the park’s low slopes. She glances over and sees May watching the movement of the few customers on the ice, and Skye decides to risk hinting.

“You know,” she says slowly, “I’ve never been ice-skating.”

A grin breaks out on May’s face like it was just waiting to be revealed, and she looks over at Skye excitedly. “Oh good, I was wondering if I would have to talk you into it.”

May gets their tickets, and they check out skates from a shed, leaving their shoes with a claim tag once they’ve got the skates laced up on their feet.

“This might be embarrassing,” Skye says as she awkwardly thumps along on the padded sidewalk towards the entrance to the rink. “You might just need to let me hug the wall the whole time.”

But May pushes out onto the ice and executes a quick, smooth turn to bring her back facing Skye, and she holds her hand out to her. “Don’t worry--I’ll teach you,” she says with a smile.

Their first circuit around the rink is slow, with May just skating backward in front of her, holding both of Skye’s hands in hers.

“Just get used to how it feels,” she says, watching Skye’s feet. “Try to keep your skates about shoulder-width apart, keep your knees bent, chest up and your shoulders over your ankles, try to keep your skates parallel…”

The second time around, she puts Skye’s hand on the wall and demonstrates the basic skating pattern —pushing off from one angled skate at a time—then talks Skye through it carefully. By the time they are halfway around the rink, Skye feels like she’s found a rhythm, and she grins at the woman holding her hand as she lets go of the wall.

“It’s actually not so hard,” she says, and May smiles. “But you seem like you’re still holding back on me. Do you do this a lot?”

May looks away, still smiling. “No, not much anymore. It used to be one of my favorite things, though.”

“Can you do that?” Skye asks, nodding towards a skater in the center of the rink executing some kind of spin on one skate. May looks in the same direction and shrugs.
“Maybe, if I had figure skates instead of hockey skates,” she says, glancing down at their feet. “But it’s risky to do it with unfamiliar gear and not a lot of practice.”

“Can you show me how to skate backward?” Skye requests.

May does.

Skye makes it off the ice and to a nearby picnic bench nearly an hour later without falling once, and May moves over to a drink stand, returning with a Styrofoam cup in each hand.

“Coffee?” Skye asks, pulling the lid off hers and peering down through the steam.

“Hot chocolate,” May corrects, sipping hers. “Not my favorite, but it was the only hot thing they had that wasn’t coffee.”

“What do you have against coffee?” Skye asks with a grin, sipping her drink. “Too mainstream?”

May just shrugs. “I hate it. I have no explanation.”

After a few minutes of sipping their warming drinks and resting in silence, Skye nudges May’s skate under the table.

“Would you show me what you can do without me?” she asks, nodding towards the rink. “I can tell you’re thinking about it.”

May shakes her head. “Skates, remember?” she says, gently kicking Skye’s skate back.

“It’s my birthday?” Skye attempts, playing her only other card.

To her surprise, May sighs indulgently and stands up.

“Two minutes.”

May is back on the ice before Skye even makes it to her feet, and she leans on the outside of the rink wall as May takes herself in a fast loop around the just-smoothed ice. She sees her execute several graceful switches between skating forwards and backwards, then a few tight, fast turns that take her towards the empty center of the rink, where she does one of those moves where she spins on one skate while carefully holding her other leg oblique in front of her, pushing off into another circuit that includes a single, smooth jump. It’s amazing to watch, and Skye is actively editing her conception of May that she’s been revising and revising over the years. Maybe the most striking thing, however, is how at ease May looks through the whole thing, how relaxed…

...how happy.

_Have you ever seen her that happy?_

Skye’s cheeks almost hurt from grinning so wide when May finally skates back over to her, stumbling a little as she thumps off the ice onto the padded sidewalk.

“That was amazing!” Skye says as May catches her hand. “That was—“

But May is already pulling her towards the skate rental shack. “I have to get out of sight,” she whispers urgently.

And just like that, the bubble bursts, reality rushing in with its cruel reminder.
May is breathing very slowly and intentionally as she tugs Skye around the side of the skate shack—they aren’t exactly hidden, but they’re at least out of sight of most of the people at the rink.

“Guess you’ll have to get our shoes back yourself,” May says apologetically, her eyes a little unfocused as she presses the claim tag into Skye’s hand. “I’m so sorry—I wish I could stay longer.”

“I know, May,” Skye says, not trying to hide the sadness in her voice as she tucks the token into her pocket. “Thank you for today.”

May puts one hand on Skye’s shoulder, then pulls the wad of cash out of her pocket and tucks it into the front of Skye’s coat.

“Don’t spend it all in one place,” May grins as she looks up at Skye.

“May I can’t—”

“The next time you see me will be April 13,” May interrupts, zeroing in on Skye’s eyes. Her hands remain gripping the lapels of her coat, and Skye thinks she sees May catch herself as she barely leans towards her.

_Hold up, was she about to…_

But May just puts her forehead to Skye’s shoulder and exhales once, then raises her head and presses her lips against Skye’s cheek in a quick kiss.

“It was so good to see you, Da—Skye,” the woman whispers, her breath warm against her skin.

“How happy birthday.”

Skye makes her hands stay still and not grasp at May.

“Thank you,” she whispers back and closes her eyes, waiting until she hears the familiar sound of May being sucked back into whatever portal dropped her here in the first place.

She's never known what to say in these moments. It's always felt wrong to say _Goodbye._

When Skye opens her eyes to see the pile of clothes on the ground on top of the skates, she hesitates only for a moment before crouching and stuffing everything except the skates into her bag. She takes the skates back to the shack, putting May's shoes in her bag and her own back on her feet. It’s already nearly six o’clock, meaning she had better head back to the home now anyway. Before setting off back towards the subway stop, though, Skye pulls the wad of cash out of her coat and subtly counts the gift.

It’s over eight hundred dollars.

She puts two hundred in each of her socks and all but twenty of the rest of it in her bra. She never makes it to the library, but on the way home, she stops at the Corner and buys Lariesha five Cokes and four Snickers bars.

_July 21, 2006—May is 45, Skye is 16_

They’re outside tonight.

She had appeared with Skye in some kind of storage room, where the girl had been apparently
hiding out for a large chunk of the day.

“You owe me 30 bucks,” Skye says annoyedly from the other side of an ancient file cabinet while May dressed behind it. “I asked off work today so that I would be in a safe place when you showed up, and now it’s nearly 9 and you’re just now coming around.”

“I’ll tell the universe to be more considerate of your work schedule,” May says dryly as she pulls the jeans up to her hips. They’re apparently hers—Skye has told her a story about May appearing fully dressed back in 2004 from some other location in the city (must mean the personal bolt-hole she keeps in Midtown), and May chooses to be grateful that she finally has her own size and style of jeans to wear when she visits.

“What are you doing for a job now anyway?” May asks as she pulls one of Skye’s t-shirts on.

“The neighborhood grocery needed a girl to stock shelves, but the manager hired me on the spot when I told her that I could also get their accounts organized and set them up with an inventory system in the computer—which is like from 1995 but whatever.... I mean, she made me prove that I could do it first, but now she gives me snacks to take home and also pays me a little extra.”

May steps out from behind the filing cabinet as she shoves her feet into the flip-flops from the bottom of the bag, and Skye smiles at the sight of her all in teen clothes.

“What decade were you a teenager in?” she asks, cocking her head. “I’m trying to figure out what you actually would have looked like when you were 16.”

May almost answers “The eighties,” but then she remembers that it won’t be long before Skye starts scanning public records looking for her, so she just smiles and shrugs.

“Are we staying in here tonight?” she asks, remembering a previous visit to this attic in the dead of winter, which was apparently the last time Skye saw her. She and Skye had sat amongst the dusty furniture of this closet with their legs tucked under a blanket and worked on Skye’s trig homework together until Skye had complained that it had been too cold to write and simply burrowed into May’s shoulder, falling asleep with one cold hand tucked inside May’s.

But tonight, Skye shakes her head and leads her through a darkened back stairwell to a ladder, which takes them up to the building’s roof.

Skye leads her over to the low wall on the edge of the building and pulls out a blanket from a plastic bag that she’s carrying. May helps her lay it out on the still-warm roofing beside the wall so that they can lean back against it. Skye sits down first and May sits beside her, close enough that their arms touch, but doesn’t reach to pull her into an embrace. Skye’s a little too old for that to be innocent now.

Skye sets the plastic bag between them and pulls out two cans of Mountain Dew and a package of Oreos. Neither of these are things May enjoys, but she smiles anyway.

“I feel sixteen again,” she says, cracking open her can and touching it to Skye’s.

“I’ve figured out which junk foods actually have the most nutritional value for money,” Skye says, pulling out an Oreo and offering it to May. “Oreos aren’t one of them, but you get a lot of individual cookies for your money.”

May knows what this admission hints at, but she just looks up at the sky above them and saves her questions for later.
The orphanage is a three-story building surrounded by much taller buildings, so there isn’t much of a view from their position. However, the time is just right for the fading daylight to be its own show as the patches of sky between buildings slowly change color above them as night settles on the city. May nibbles on a cookie while Skye takes one and holds it in her hand, clearly building up to saying something to May.

“I’m thinking of leaving,” she blurts out suddenly. “Getting out of here before I turn 18.”

“Leaving this home?” May clarifies, looking over at Skye. “Or leaving New York?”

“Both,” Skye answers, holding her gaze. She already sounds sure of herself.

May can’t pretend like she’s surprised, but she asks the next questions anyway. “Where are you planning to go?”

Skye fiddles with the cookie in her hands. “South. I’ve had enough of New York. Enough of the cold.”

May thinks of the next place she’ll see Skye—on the road and far from here—and almost tries to talk her out of it, but then she remembers the next big thing that will be happening in New York in a few years, and she changes her mind.

“Are you sure you’re ready for that?” May asks, trying to be practical. “Once you do that, who will you call if there’s an emergency?”

Skye shrugs. “I’m trying not to overthink it. I’ve already got some money put away, thanks to your start-up grant. Plus, I’ve been doing my research, so I’ve already got some cheap places figured out.”

She can tell that Skye is waiting for her to ask where those places are, but May chooses not to. She’ll find her no matter where she goes.

“What will you do to make money?” May asks. “A thousand bucks only gets you so far.”

Skye looks away. “I can settle down once I get far enough away from New York,” she sighs. “I’ll figure something out.”

“You could at least stay until you finish your diploma,” she attempts, but Skye shakes her head. “I can’t stay here, May. I’ve done this for 16 years—I’m ready for this part of my life to be over.”

They sit in silence for a while longer, and May thinks of the string of halfway houses and homeless digs that Skye told her filled those first few years out on her own. She sighs, knowing that nothing she can say will change that future, and just reaches over and laces her fingers through Skye’s.

“Don’t do anything stupid,” she says earnestly. “You’ve got a future to make it to.”

Skye smiles, then turns and settles against May’s side, resting her head on May’s shoulder. “I know. That’s why I’m not afraid to do this.”

May doesn’t pull back when she feels Skye’s thumb sliding gently over the back of her hand, she just leans her cheek against the top of the girl’s head and shares up at the ever-changing twilight and tries to remember how long it will be before Skye sees her turn up at her campout in Jersey.

“May,” Skye says after a moment, “can I ask you something?”

May looks over her, but Skye is looking down at their hands. “You can always ask.”
Against her shoulder, the girl takes a breath. “Who else do you travel to in your past?”

May lets herself smile as she looks back up at the night above them, resting her cheek against Skye’s hair. “Myself, usually, at different ages. Places where important things happened. Or I’ll go back to the original event—the Bad Thing that happened that caused me to time travel? I go back there a lot. Sometimes I visit important people, but before they’ve met me in real time. Like you. Or my oldest friend. Or even my parents.”

She feels Skye’s surprise in the way her scalp moves under her cheek.

“That’s a new one,” the girl says, her tone begging for the story.

May smiles to herself. “Well, I go to the houses that we lived in, but I’ve also been to my parents’ home from before I was born. It’s only happened twice, and the first time I was so surprised that I just stopped in the middle of the street staring at them. They of course didn’t know me, but one time I introduced myself as a neighbor ‘from around the block,’ and of course my mother remembered that incidence thirteen years later when Adult Melinda appeared in her daughter’s bedroom—‘Aren’t you that neighbor from thirteen years and five states away?!’ It was such a mess.”

“How old were you when your parents finally found out about the time travel?” Skye asks, her thumb still sliding soothingly over May’s fingers.

“I was 10—still years away from time traveling, and I guess ten-year-old me had thought that I was going to be able to keep my secret forever. But my future self basically outed herself, and I think I agree now that it was about time that my parents knew that they would be seeing the adult version of their daughter materializing naked in their houses every now and then.”

“How did they take it?” Skye asks. May can feel her smile in the cheek pressed against her shoulder.

“Incredulously, as they should have. Disappearing in front of them was the most convincing thing I could do. But I don’t think they were fully convinced until the next date I said I’d be coming around actually happened. After that…sure, it was still weird for everybody, but they got used to it.”

“Like me.” She can hear the smile in Skye’s voice, so she smiles too.

“Like you.”

A short silence follows, and May feels Skye trying to get her nerve up for another important question. She has a feeling she knows which question it is, and Skye’s forced lightness around the question can’t mask the nerves.

“May,” the girl finally says quietly, “in the future…what am I to you?”

Knowing that this is something she needs to look her in the eye for, May lifts her head and turns slightly so that Skye also sits up to face her, their heads both tilted against the wall behind them.

“May,” the girl finally says quietly, “in the future…what am I to you?”

Knowing that this is something she needs to look her in the eye for, May lifts her head and turns slightly so that Skye also sits up to face her, their heads both tilted against the wall behind them.

“What?” May asks, just to be sure this is the question she’s been trying to prepare herself for.

Skye glances away as she takes a deep breath, but she meets May’s eyes as she continues. “In the future that you’re coming from, when you and I are in one place together—who am I to you? What kind of relationship do you and I have?”

May stares at her for a moment, and Skye goes on, clearly nervous. “I mean, you say you visit significant people, events, and places, but God knows those foster homes weren’t important, and only one of those visits was a significant event…so it must mean that I’m an important person to you
someday. But if I'm not your daughter...who am I to you?"

It’s only when Skye squeezes gently that May realizes they’re still holding hands.

“Am I...” Skye is searching for the word, the label, those words that, even to May have always felt not quite right.

*Best friend? Girlfriend? Lover? Soulmate?* May supplies in her head. *Yes. All.*

And yet none. Those words all sound wrong when tacked above their relationship. Mostly, they feel inadequate.

But Skye gives up looking for the word. “Do you love me?”

May smiles, giving Skye’s hand a small squeeze. “That's no secret. I’m here because I do.”

“But do you love me...most? Am I your...” Skye still can’t seem to pick a term to be the object of her sentence. “Why else would you keep coming back to me?”

She won't give Skye any words she doesn’t have.

“You’re the star for my comet,” May answers ambiguously, smiling gently at Skye.

But the girl shakes her head. “That’s just kids’ talk, though. Please, May—in twelve years of visits, you’ve never told me why I really matter enough that you to keep coming back. If you’re not my mother, what are we?”

*She knows. You know she knows. She doesn’t really need you to tell her, she just wants you to confirm it.*

But there isn't a word for this in May’s vocabulary either. Skye occupies a space in her heart that May didn’t know was even there—she had never noticed its emptiness until Skye had filled it with herself. Maybe Skye had created a place where it hadn’t existed before, bending the laws of nature like a celestial body, changing the shape of time and space themselves with her presence.

“You’re important to me, Skye,” May says, pulling her hand out of Skye’s as she turns more fully towards the girl, her shoulder digging into the wall. “But I’m not going to answer your question. Things will happen the way they happen—you don’t need to know ahead of time.”

*You don’t need that pressure. You don’t need that fatalism.*

*This was the mercy you granted me, too.*

Skye looks away, clearly frustrated, but when she looks back over at May, she suddenly leans in, her gaze intense.

“Kiss me,” the girl whispers. *Orders.*

May holds her gaze and shakes her head.

“No, Skye,” she whispers back, trying to make the rejection gentle.

Skye’s face changes, but instead of looking disappointed, she looks almost *smug* as she barely leans back, gazing at May.

“I know what we are, then,” she whispers. “I know because if you were only ever going to be like a
mother or just a friend to me, you'd have kissed my forehead or my cheek without worrying. But we won't be that, will we? So kiss me and show me.”

May actually laughs once, a smile spreading across her lips. See? Things happen the way they happen.

But as funny as the situation is, May has rules that she imposes on herself for the sake of whatever childhood of Skye’s she can preserve, and she shakes her head.

“Skye, you’re just a kid,” May sighs, though she doesn’t look away.

Skye doesn’t look away either. “I’ve never been ‘just a kid’ to you, though, have I?” she asks, her voice dropping for half the phrase into the closest echo of 24-year-old Skye that May has heard all night.

May thinks of the young woman that she left sleeping in their bed when she vanished, the one the teenager in front of her is still years away from being, the woman who May will one day hold and touch and do all kinds of amazing things with and always come back to…

But the girl leaning slowly towards her now is a kid. And regardless of how ready Skye is to race forward into the future and what she will become, May knows that this is not the way it happens.

Skye’s going to hate her for this, but May knows it’s better this way.

She reaches up with one hand to touch Skye’s cheek as the girl leans closer, feeling the difference in her skin, how it feels younger (less worn-down). But as Skye’s eyes drift closed and the distance between their lips nearly disappears, May moves her thumb to press gently on Skye’s chin, stopping her movement in her tracks.

Skye opens her eyes and May tries to put all the love that she can into her gaze. She stares at her for a long moment, letting the hand on Skye’s cheek be her anchor as the world tilts. With her last seconds, May tips her chin and presses a gentle kiss to Skye’s forehead.

“February 26,” she whispers against the girl’s skin. “I’ll see you soon.”

And then the world turns over, and she’s gone.
December 31, 2013—January 4, 2014: Skye is 24, May is 44

Thirty-six hours after she set off a bomb in its basement (and to think there was a time that everyone thought the worst you could do to SHIELD was to hack it...), the Hub is still one of only three bases clear of Hydra. Captain America (and some guy with mechanical wings) managed to take down the Helicarriers at the Triskelion but they’re both off the grid, Maria Hill has assumed representation of SHIELD to the US government (safely cushioned by Stark lawyers), and the Black Widow—Agent Romanoff—dumped all of SHIELD’s intel onto the public internet as a move to tear up Hydra’s trump card and expose every secret, including SHIELD’s own.

Unfortunately, that was a little like throwing the baby out with the bathwater. In the still-boiling aftermath of the Hydra coup, Skye has found herself organizing SHIELD’s remaining cybersecurity and communications teams to follow up with all the world-changing information that is now up for grabs in cyberspace. She has spent days working with them to create and improve programs to track down every thread of high-risk intel and vaporize them into non-existence, to follow up on the actual beating hearts who now need to disappear out of their blown covers/exposed locations, and to reestablish secure, Hydra-proof communications. The irony of her first—no, second; the Clairvoyant was your first—SHIELD mission is not lost on her.

A few months ago, you were hacking SHIELD because you thought the common people deserved to know the truth.

But now that her pipe dream has come true, Skye just feels sick.

She spends most of her time inside the Hub while May leads the work on their team’s plane with Fitz and Simmons. Ward left the day before with Agent Hand to deliver does-not-even-deserve-to-be-called-Agent Garrett to the Fridge, but the Hub hasn’t heard anything from them since. By the third day of scrambling for high ground with only snatches of sleep in between sprints, Skye feels like they’re finally standing on a patchy but firm enough foundation.

She has just delivered the good news to Coulson that the Cube has been re-taken when May walks into the control room and announces that the hull of their Bus is repaired and their flight systems are back online. Coulson doesn’t even turn to acknowledge her, which makes Skye nearly snap at him in May’s defense—they have more important matters than hurt feelings right now.

But his world just came down around him, Skye reminds herself, watching their exchange with a painful feeling in her chest. There are plenty of people for him to be mad at, but May’s the only one in easy reach.

A sudden transmission from an Air Force colonel brings more good news for everyone: a military “peace-keeping force” is being sent into the Hub to “ask a few questions”.

Coulson wears a diplomatic persona well for the camera, but as soon as the call ends, his face falls into a grimace as he turns away from the screen.

“This doesn’t sound good,” he says, uncrossing his arms and heading out to the halls. May and Skye immediately fall in step beside him. “If Talbot’s leading the op then there’s nothing peace-keeping about it.”
May suggests fortifying the defenses and attempting to hold out against any advances, but Coulson nixes the idea immediately. The last thing SHIELD needs is to start a war with the US government. He turns towards the hangar and gives the order to enact “Odyssey protocol”—The fighting’s over. Get out while you can and go where you will.

Skye throws her computer gear into a bag and races after them out to the Bus, where Fitz has jerry-rigged the ramp just well enough for them to make an escape. The six of them board their patched-up plane, and Skye makes a concerted effort to not look out the windows at the battlefield they’re leaving behind.

May:

She doesn’t have a destination, but they need to stay out of everyone’s radar, so she pulls them up into the Arctic circle and takes them back towards America. It’s still the most likely place that they’ll find allies. And fuel—she’s been watching their fuel levels dropping throughout the flight and knows the plane must be leaking. Of course.

The cockpit door cracks at 35,000 feet, and a splintered voice threads in.

“May?” It sounds like Skye is hovering in the doorway, afraid to come closer. “Coulson told me to collect everyone’s badges.”

Her tone is almost apologetic, and May sighs internally.

When Coulson asked if you wanted to give her a badge…

She pulls her badge folder out of her inside jacket pocket, flipping it open to look at the ID and badge one last time. Victoria Hand had put this badge in her palm at her Academy graduation twenty years ago. Fury had given her the new ID when she had agreed to his assignment to the Bus and he moved up to Level 7. She’s never considered herself a nostalgic person, but she’s suddenly fighting the urge to clutch this last remnant of her life’s service to her heart and refuse to let anyone take one more piece of it from her.

But what good are a badge and identification for an organization that no longer exists? Or in some ways, never did exist?

She hears Skye shifting hesitantly across the space between them, and May bites the inside of her lip against the pain she just doesn’t have space for right now. Wordlessly, she closes the folder and holds the badge up for the girl to take, but the gentleness of Skye’s hand replacing the badge surprises her. Her fingers are cool as they slide into May’s, gripping with a steadiness that is both fortifying and obliterating. May swallows, her chest pulling tight. She can’t make herself look up, but she can hear the heartbreak in Skye’s voice.

“I really am sorry, May,” the girl whispers, squeezing her hand gently. “I can’t imagine what you’re feeling right now, but I know you and Coulson fought for the right things for twenty years. Just remember, whatever happens next, that’s not nothing.”

May stares straight ahead, still biting the inside of her lip, and she fights the sudden urge to bring the back of Skye’s hand against her cheek and draw all the comfort that she can out of the contact. But she makes herself just nod, squeezing Skye’s hand once, before pulling her hand away and putting it back on the controls.
Skye takes this as her cue, straightening up and moving back towards the door behind them.

“Coulson also told me to delete everyone’s electronic records,” Skye adds as she pauses at the exit. “We’re disappearing. Thought you should know.”

The cockpit feels very, very empty once she goes.

Not long after that, they all get called to the holocom—Coulson’s badge is displaying coordinates for a location in the Canadian wilderness, and he wants her to point the plane there. She holds her tongue in front of the others, lets Triplett be the voice of skepticism on her behalf, thinking through her failed mission and how this is the kind of erratic behavior she would have reported to Fury.

She follows that thought to its inevitable conclusion and knows what she has to do.

She half-expects him to immediately order her out when she goes up to his office a little while later, but he just stares at her coldly when she steps in.

“You okay?” she begins cautiously.

But he’s not in the mood.

“Tell you what—let’s skip the part where you act concerned about my well-being,” he says bluntly. “What is it you want?”

She takes a deep breath and goes right for it. “Look, Fury’s dead. It’s hard to accept, and we haven’t had a chance to grieve…”

“There’s no reason to,” he interrupts. “I have faith that he’s alive.”

She shakes her head, stepping closer. “That feeling, this belief that he is reaching out to you, Phil? It might not be faith, it might be something else.”

He looks pointedly at her. “And what’s that?”

“Hydra,” she says quietly. “Impulses implanted in your brain right alongside memories of a beautiful island…”

He’s already shaking his head, staring disbelievingly at her. “Really? This is what you want to come to me with right now? That’s not possible. Fury ordered the surgery.”

“Yes, but he wasn’t in charge of the Tahiti project,” May snaps. “And the person behind that operation may be—

But he’s snagged on those words. “Wait, wait, what did you say? Somebody else was behind it? Who the hell was that?”

But of course that’s information beyond her clearance level, probably only as high as Fury’s, and without him, there’s no way to know who was responsible for the TAHITI project.

“And there’s a real chance that Hydra is controlling your actions,” May finishes. “That’s why Fury put me on this plane. To watch you.”

He won’t give her his weapon as a precaution. But she leaves his office realizing that there is one thing left that she can do for him.
**Skye:**

The coordinates from Coulson’s badge are about a seven-mile hike from where May sets the plane down, and they only have an eight-hour window to get there and hope there’s a place to hide their Bus from the imminent satellite flyover.

Skye doesn’t know how far they’ve walked before she feels the deferred fatigue of three awful days set in, probably compounded by the fact that she was, you know, nearly dead a month ago, and she starts to fall behind the others as they slog through the unbroken snow.

It still surprises her when May falls back into step beside her too.

“I left New York and headed south when I was younger because I’d had enough of the cold,” Skye attempts between frigid lungfuls of air, glancing over at May, stoic beneath her hat and hood. “I clearly didn’t know the meaning of the word yet.”

May just reaches over and slips a steadying hand around Skye’s arm, and they continue forward, following the man with a compass in front of them.

“You think he’s okay?” Skye asks at one point after (hopefully) at least another mile of trekking.

But May just sighs. “It’s been a rough couple of days.”

“That’s not what I meant,” Skye says, thinking of the way their two leaders spoke to each other the last time they were in front of her together.

“Don’t act like you know what Fury had me do,” May responds. She sounds a little sharp and equally exhausted.

“Well he had you spy on him for a reason,” Skye counters, “so what was it?”

May stops, turning halfway to face her, and Skye sees her debate for only a moment before answering.

“Fury was concerned about Coulson finding out the truth,” May says, presumably referring to the alien source of the medicine. “The doctors thought it would have negative consequences.”

Skye’s brow wrinkles. “Like what? Like he’d go crazy?”

May shakes her head. “It’s not clear. All I know is that he seemed stable until today, and now he has us in the middle of nowhere chasing ghosts.”

“That’s because his whole world fell apart,” Skye says defensively.

May turns away, not taking Skye’s arm as she resumes walking after their team. “He’s not alone in that.”

**May:**

Coulson’s outburst when they reach an empty clearing at the assigned coordinates is somewhat understandable, and later May will wonder what might have happened if Coulson hadn’t launched his badge into the air, prompting an automated gun to appear and shoot it down. Now, as they trairese into an underground base using a door that appears from a cleft in the rock, she guesses she should
just be thankful that there was something worth finding...and a place where she can repair and refuel the plane.

There’s a single Level-6 agent there who calls himself Eric Koenig, and he seems more than happy to welcome them into the Base that, he reminds them, doesn’t exist. He calls it Providence, and May guesses that’s no coincidence.

When Koenig tells them that the Fridge has fallen, Skye immediately gets Ward on the line, visibly breathing a sigh of relief when he answers. It takes him 12 hours to get to them, and he arrives with plenty of marks that show how the previous 72 have been.

“By the time we got to the Fridge, it was overrun. HYDRA everywhere,” he tells them while Jemma patches his many scrapes and fractures up in the plane’s lab. “We couldn’t stop them.”

“What were they after?” Skye asks, and May thinks of the objects they have sent there in the last few months alone.

*Gavitonium.*

*The blaster from Peru.*

*The Berserker staff.*

*Ian Quinn…*

Ward looks overwhelmed. “Everything.”

The day wasn’t a total loss, however. Ward tells them that Garrett is dead, though apparently not without a fight.

“As soon as I had the upper hand, I put two in the back of his head. One from me—” He looks over at Trip “—and one from you.”

Their newest team member shakes his head. “I would have emptied the mag,” he says certainly.

The Fridge’s prisoners are no longer prisoners, and Coulson sets Skye compiling a list of the escaped inmates while May works on fixing the busted fuel line on the plane. Coulson fixates on one of the people on the list—she knew he would—and wants to take the team in Ward’s quinjet to go after him. Koenig won’t let them go without going through orientation, so May sits in the chair and relaxes as she tells the whole truth for the first time in months.

“What is your full name?”

“Eye color?”

“Ever been married?”

“What’s the difference between an egg and a rock?”

“You wash up on a deserted island. Next to you is a box. What’s in the box?”

“Why are you here, Agent May?”

It’s the first question that makes her pause, but the answer, in the end is still simple.

“Coulson,” she replies.
It seems to satisfy.

Ward needs to stay and recover and Coulson wants Skye to keep running point on the escaped inmates, and she already knows that he’s not going to let her go either. She corners him in the kitchen before he leads FitzSimmons and Trip out to the hangar.

“Look, I remember when you brought Daniels in,” she says when he won’t persuaded not to go, “I know how personal this is for you, but—“

“We don’t do personal,” he snaps, loading his gun. “Not anymore.”

Those words sting, but she doesn’t back down.

“Phil, the polygraph cleared me. I’m not hiding anything.”

“You mean you’re not hiding anything else,” he cuts back. “Unless you do know who was behind the TAHITI project.”

She thinks again of the one thing she can still do for this situation. It’s untimely and probably going to take calling in favors, but it’s not impossible.

The first thing she has to do is lose this battle.

His eyes still dare her to stop him as she watches him leave with Fitz, Simmons, and Trip. She stands silently beside Skye and Ward and lets him think she’s finished fighting. She does what he ordered first and repairs the plane’s fuel line, and Ward finds her on the plane just as she finishes packing her bag.

She’s only slightly surprised that, out of everyone she’s spoken to in the last week, he’s the most sympathetic.

“When you get orders, you don’t question them,” he says knowingly as she picks up her bag. “You follow them, no matter the price.”

“Well this price was too high,” May says as she moves past him and out the plane.

“What should I tell him?” Ward calls after her, referring to their absent “leader”.

“Whatever you want,” she calls without looking back, letting the words sound as defeated as she feels.

She almost gets out the door without another conversation. But she should have known she wouldn’t get away with avoiding this one.

“What are you doing?” Skye’s voice carries down the hallway as May stands by the exit and pulls on her coat, hat, and gloves.

Should have put them on outside…

She doesn’t reply immediately as Skye hurries down the hallway towards her. She knows the girl can tell what she’s doing; she just doesn’t want to believe it.

“I have orders, Skye,” May says quietly once the girl is close enough to hear her. “And they’re not done yet.”

Skye looks dumbfounded. “Really. Your orders. You’re going to leave us here alone and walk out
into the Canadian wilderness because you have orders.”

“You’ve got Ward, Koenig, and a secret base to protect you, Skye,” May responds patiently as she leans down to pick up her bag. “You’re going to be fine.”

But Skye surprises her by planting one foot on the duffel at their feet, making May look up at her, brows raised.

Skye is a ball of ignited anger, but her voice is very level. “Fuck your orders,” she says slowly, shaking her head. “There is no SHIELD. There is no Fury. Whatever orders you have—”

But May pushes the girl’s knee at just the right angle to make Skye lose her balance on one foot as May straightens up with her bag in her hand.

“The reason for my mission has not changed,” May says, meeting the girl’s furious gaze. “Coulson may not want me here protecting him anymore—but he needs the whole truth about what happened to him if he’s going to protect himself.”

She turns and hits the door’s control panel, and cold January air rushes in as the door slides open. May is almost to the top of the steps when she hears last words that make her stop in her tracks.

“You promised you weren’t going to leave anymore.”

May takes a deep breath of the cold air and closes her eyes.

Oh. It’s like that.

She can’t tell Skye more than she already has about where she’s going and what she needs to do. But she refuses to let one more person make her feel guilty about this. So she turns around and says the words that she knows are going to hurt but are going to end this fight and get her out the door.

“I didn’t promise you that, Skye,” she says as she turns and looks back down at the girl standing immobile at the base of the steps. May forces her voice to remain steady and careful. “A future version of me told you that there’s going to come a day when I don’t leave you anymore. But I guess we’re just not there yet. I said I wouldn’t leave until I have to. And that’s now.”

She sees the way those words wound, the way she’s trying so hard not to show how much they hurt. She’s visibly trembling, but maybe that’s from the cold slicing in from outside. “I thought—“

But they don’t have time for this right now.

“You are not my mission, Skye,” May says levelly. “You never have been. You’re the one that I never agreed to but got dropped on me anyway, and until this is over, you are on your own.”

She turns and strides out the door before this gets any worse. As she hefts her bag on her shoulder and glances back, she sees Skye marching away in the opposite direction, punching the control panel to close the door between them.

Done.

She waits until she’s twenty miles south of the base before she makes the call on a satellite phone that she swiped from the office.

“Am I talking to my present-day daughter?” her mother asks as soon as Melinda says her name.

“Yes,” she responds, the single syllable a puff of steam in the air in front of her.
Her mother lets out a slow breath into the phone, and Melinda braces herself for the storm.

“First,” her mother says tightly, “I am very glad you are alive and I cannot imagine what these last few days must have been like, but second—“

“I’m sorry, Mom,” Melinda sighs into the phone, letting the hurt seep in because she knows that it’s the fastest way to make her mother show a little mercy. “I’m all right. I should have called sooner, but I’m calling now—I’m all right. But I need some help.”

“Well that explains it,” her mother says, sounding tired. “You didn’t let me finish—my second question is to ask you why in the world I am driving through Canada right now.”

“I—what?” Melinda stops walking, knee-deep in snow. “Why are you—“

“I’m asking you!” her mother cuts her off. “Some future incarnation of you was just here a week ago and told me that on January 4, I should gas the car and start driving towards Ontario and keep my phone ready for you to call...”

Melinda feels a disbelieving, possibly delirious smile spread across her lips and tips her face up at the sky breaking through the trees above her.

Thank you, Jiejie...

“...that you would be needing some help there and that you’d call me with more directions,” her mother is still saying into the phone. “Melinda, why in the world am I driving to Canada?”

Skye:

Her hands are shaking, but Skye refuses to let herself cry over this.

How could she say that?

How could she do that?

How could she look you in the eye and leave you again?

She hasn’t made herself go back to face the others yet, hasn’t made the walk through the empty hallways up to the office where Koenig should be monitoring her freshly-hacked NSA satellite feed. For now, she’s hiding out in the bathroom, curled over one of the sinks and willing herself to, for once, have a little self-control. She’s managed to keep herself from crying by focusing on the anger and letting it burn hot enough to cauterize the other wounds she’s nursing, trying to let her own thoughts be louder than May’s echoing words.

“You are not my mission, Skye. You never have been. You’re the one that I never agreed to but got dropped on me anyway, and until this is over, you are on your own.”

This is where things crash, where Skye looks at the future that she knows is certain and holds it up next to the present circumstances and she is baffled all over again by the impossibility of that future somehow coming to pass.

She’s leaving, but she has to come back. She’s gone, but you’ll be together again eventually. You’re angry now, but you won’t always be.
And someday, somehow, she’s going to love you the way that you love her.

But. How.

Every time it’s felt like May has taken a step forward in their relationship, it’s followed immediately by two steps back, or at the very least a return of the intentional distance the woman seems so intent on marking off between them. And besides all that there’s Ward…

Once the team gets back, once Coulson and May work things out, once the smoke clears after all this Hydra mess and you put SHIELD back together again…

But it’s been twenty years of visits, four months of tension, and she’s tired. Tired of waiting, tired of the back-and-forth. And she doesn’t know how much more of this roller-coaster she can take.

Skye straightens up and stares at herself in the mirror. May might be a statue, but she knows how to calcify too. She hasn’t made it to twenty-four without learning how to wear a convincing mask.

If it helped, I’d rage all the time. But it doesn’t.

She pulls herself together and sucks in a breath before unlocking the bathroom door and heading back for Koenig’s office to see how the searches are coming. He’s not in there, but Ward comes in behind her just a moment later. Of course, he just accidently rips her flimsy stitches again.

“May’s gone,” he says without ceremony.

Skye remains facing away from him as she bites her lip, trying to keep everything she’s feeling below the surface and focus on the simple facts.

Would she have said something different to him? Did she care about him any more than she cares about you?

She plays dumb just to see if he’ll fall for it, turning around and putting on her best confused face.

“What do you mean gone? Gone where?”

But he just shrugs. “She left. I’m sure if I asked her where, she wouldn’t have told me.”

Skye looks away, keeping the anger in her chest just below a rolling boil.

He could at least be angry with you…

“She never felt anything for us, did she? She just played us so she could keep an eye on Coulson.”

But Ward’s response is one that just reminds her all over again why he and May were always a more logical fit.

“That was her mission,” he says simply, and that seems to be enough for him.

“Did you feel anything for her?” she asks without thinking, looking sharply over at him.

Ward seems surprised by the question, but he shakes his head immediately. “No. The only comfort we took in each other was knowing we didn’t have to.”

Those are images that Skye doesn’t want in her head, so she focuses on her own memories instead.

“You can’t choose to feel,” she challenges, thinking of the embarrassing, hopeless love that has kept
her from giving up on May throughout these past few months.

But Ward still seems unworried. “Usually I can,” he says with a shrug. “But it’s different with us.”

Mentally, Skye trips over those words, suddenly remembering what else had happened the last time she saw Ward.

“Us is a strong word,” she says quickly while Ward moves to the bar and pours them each a drink. “I mean, I know I kissed you, but to be fair, I thought there was a 97% chance you were going to die…”

“But we didn’t die,” he says coolly as he turns around and hands her one of the tumblers.

Skye takes it but doesn’t sip it. “Yes, which is very good, but there’s no rush on ‘us’ being an ‘us’. It’s not like it’s a good time to start anything.”

He shrugs again. “It’s never a good time. But we’ve gotta start somewhere.”

He just wants to talk, and she figures there’s no reason why she can’t do that while she waits for Eric to get back to the office. Ward seems nervous, but he says some surprisingly kind things, and she makes herself listen. The back and forth gets softened a little by the alcohol, and Skye watches as he lets a few of his walls come down in front of her. He tells her about the family that he was unlucky enough to have—an older brother who turned him on his younger brother, parents who were even worse…

“There are things about me that you wouldn’t like if you knew,” he says at one point, and she can tell that he is certain of that. Something in his eyes looks familiar, and she realizes that it’s a look she had once been used to seeing in a mirror.

“You think I don’t have skeletons?” she responds, thinking of the years of secrets, both tragic and wonderful, that she has dragged around with her to every new home, new state, and new life.

*Because of the hand you were dealt.*

*Because of the ways your heart kept getting ripped up throughout those years.*

*Because of May.*

She tries to chase away all other thoughts by leaning in and kissing him.

It doesn’t feel wonderful, and it doesn’t make her feel any better, but she’s been here before. Every relationship she had attempted over the years had always felt like this—a one-sided infidelity, a fix to tide her over to something she couldn’t have just yet. But as much as she would like to throw herself into this and forget everything outside of this room, she knows this isn’t fair to him. When she pulls away to make up an excuse, though, she is confused by the smear of blood on her hand.

He sees it at the same time and jumps up, saying something about one of his cuts opening up and hustling out to get it cleaned up. Skye doesn’t want to take the easy road and use this as an opportunity to run away and act like this didn’t happen, but when he takes a long time to come back, she doesn’t feel bad about picking up the tablet and using it to follow the homing device in his lanyard to see where Koenig disappeared to. After all, she didn’t hack the NSA just for shits and giggles…they have a mission they should be working on…

She’s a little confused when the homing signal leads her to a pantry storage closet. She’s more confused when she doesn’t see him or even his lanyard amongst the shelves. But when she gives up
and reaches for the door handle again, two drops of blood splash onto the tablet’s screen, and she looks up at the dark, dripping shape stowed on the rack above her.

And in a moment, she understands.

She understands *everything*. 
Chapter Notes

Another May-centric chapter today, kids. She needed her moment.

**January 5, 2014, 8:31pm—May is 44, Skye is 24**

“Left here,” Melinda says, and the car swings onto the next street. Shadows and trash alternate on the asphalt stretching between apartment buildings ahead of them. The street is relatively deserted, and Melinda leans forward, scanning for any suspicious loiterers that might be staking out the apartment.

“Stop here,” she says suddenly, and her mom pulls the car up to the curb. “I’ll get out here and go through the back entrance.”

Melinda unbuckles her seatbelt and zips her coat up, checking her gun between her knees before setting the safety and tucking the weapon into her coat pocket. She doesn’t want to risk her six just to grab a bag of clothes, so she reaches into the backseat and hauls her duffel onto her lap. As she sweeps the surrounding area one more time, she hears the unmistakable sound of her mother sliding her own gun out of her purse and checking it below the steering wheel.

“You don’t need to go too,” Melinda says quickly, and her mother turns an unamused stare on her.

“You’re not going to invite your mother up?”

It’s the closest her mother gets to teasing, and Melinda almost lets herself smile in relief.

Instead of continuing the back-and-forth, she holds her mother’s gaze. “Thank you, Mom,” she says softly. “For everything.”

Her mother nods once in response, turning her eyes towards the street ahead of them.

“I’ll wait here until you let me know that everything is all right,” her mother says, and May doesn’t try to fight her on it. These kinds of things have never been up for debate.

She exits the car quickly and moves down the street without looking back, ducking into an alley and weaving up towards her building. Her apartment could very well be compromised, but it was her only personal safehouse in the tri-state area.

This Midtown apartment is a holdover from a mission in NYC long before this—a long-con, multi-agent infiltration that had ended with millions of grams of drugs seized and her promotion to Level 5. Though May had hated her cover job as an assistant to a CPA who was also keeping the books for a whole chorus of criminals, she had loved her cover apartment enough that she had purchased a similar one with her promotion bonus. She and Andrew never lived there, but he and Coulson are the only people who should know about this place besides herself. She’s counting on the fact that HYDRA has more important things to do than to track her down.

Two picked locks and a ride up the service elevator later, she’s standing at the door, one hand on the gun in her pocket as she puts the key in the lock. She turns the knob silently, and she moves through the door while drawing her gun in one smooth motion, throwing on the lights and clearing the rooms.
quickly.

Everything is as it should be.

She still doesn’t take her hand off the gun in her pocket as she goes to retrieve her bag from the stairwell where she left it and locks herself back into the apartment, checking the place one more time before she pulls the phone out of her pocket and dials her mother’s number.

“Everything’s fine,” she says when her mother answers. “Thanks again.”

“Don’t do anything stupid,” her mother responds, and then hangs up the phone without another word.

May strips her clothes and steps into a hot shower that finally drives the lingering chill from her body, standing under the spray as she peels off the bandage still wound around her right arm. The wound doesn’t start bleeding again, and she’s finally able to get a good look at it in the mirror once she’s finished her shower. It’s a small wound, which probably means it was a shattered bullet or a very small piece of glass, but she can tell by the bruising around it that it went deep before she disappeared. Six days have softened the ache everytime she uses her arm, but it will probably take a while to heal.

Amazing how fast her body can heal despite the fact that the rest of her hasn’t.

Her hair is still damp as she pulls on clean clothes from her duffle, and she extracts one of the power bars she had swiped from the base’s pantry. While she chews, she pulls out the manila envelope that her mother had left her with, the information that Melinda had requested in the same breath as a ride to New York.

“You're not going to take her out, are you?” her mother had asked in the car.

No, of course I’m not going to take out the most powerful public SHIELD figure left in DC.

Of course she wasn’t going to take out Maria.

January 6, 3:37 am

She corners Hill outside of the Capitol, and their exchange takes less time than a first-response wave of DC cops. Maria doesn’t seem surprised that it’s about Coulson, but she doesn’t have much to say either. Maria’s recitation of Fury’s words about burying the intel “when he decided not to bury Coulson” could only mean here, and May figures the thirty-six cubic feet of earth that she’ll have to lift in order to get to the coffin is the test he left to make sure anyone chasing the trail of TAHITI was truly desperate enough to find it. Regardless, she figures she’s earned the punishment.

The cemetery is halfway between DC and Baltimore, and she stops only once on the way to buy a shovel. She barely remembers the place, and it takes her several minutes to locate the right plot in the darkness. It’s not until she does find it and sets to work digging into the earth that she remembers the still-healing wound in her right arm.

It’s going to be a long night.

The lets the chaos swirl as she works through the night, working up a sweat that keeps the January chill at bay even after she shrugs out of her coat, digging herself ever closer to a coffin that has never held a body. With every shovelful of earth she lifts out of the plot in front of the headstone bearing her friend’s name, May retraces a step that brought her to this point, following the trail of choices that has put her, of all places, standing alone on her friend’s grave.
Joining SHIELD because they saw potential in her and gave her a chance. Confronting the quiet classmate from Wisconsin who had looked at her funny from day one. Dismissing his ridiculous insistence that he had met a woman who looked so much like her once in the past. Realizing that they would become something important to one another if her future had made its way into his past.

She digs deeper.

Growing beside him. Growing up beside him. Getting into trouble, getting conferenced, getting a sit-down with Nick Fury long before he was Director of SHIELD because one of her pranks had gone just a little too far. Earning her pilot's wings. Graduating beside her friend and in front of Peggy Carter. Receiving a badge from and an assignment to Victoria Hand. Flying off on mission after mission until she had more worldwide experience than both parents combined. Knowing that someday, somehow, one of those missions was going to bring her a bullet through her leg and a disorder that she would deal with for the years that followed.

Dig, turn, lift, tilt.

Dig, turn, lift, tilt.

Meeting a man who made her want to talk more than she ever had, one who smiled easily and had never touched a gun. Feeling something that made her want to put her feet down for awhile, hoping that she had found a return point for every mission. Telling him, heart hammering, about the storm that she knew was waiting in her future. Being amazed when he listened, absorbed, and came over the next day with a ring. Running away to marry him, half-expecting him to change his mind when they bumped into an older copy of herself in their home when they came back from their honeymoon. Choosing to ignore how sad the other woman had looked but somehow, not all that surprised. Kissing her husband before flying off with Coulson to Bahrain.

Dig, dig, dig.

Turn, turn, turn...

The pain, the horrible pain that she’d nearly drowned in during the weeks following that mission. Learning to live in a world that was the same as it always had been, but was now jumbled into past and present, like photos picked up from the floor and put back in a box in the wrong order. The awful helplessness as time tossed her like a raft on an ocean, the instability and uncertainty and unfairness that were at times all she could think about. Withdrawing into herself, the only coping method that could keep her focused enough to cling to the present. Losing touch with everyone around her. Stepping back from the field. Putting her wings in a drawer with her wedding ring. Learning how to breathe all over again.

Dig, dig, dig...


And then the girl.

The girl who had never been part of the story, but apparently had been part of it all along. The risk she refused to be responsible for but had protected nonetheless. The slow revelation of her presence and influence in the past of another person, the gradual displacement of resentment with familiarity. Two bullets and a razorblade. A dreamcatcher. Conversations. Touches. Tears.
And then HYDRA. Accusations. Anger. Ashes to sift through. Two faces on SHIELD. Two faces on Garrett. Two faces on her, in Coulson’s eyes.

*Turn, turn, turn.*

Coulson has every right to resent her, but she knows she did the right thing. Every choice she made in the last year…it was for him. For SHIELD.

And, apparently, all for nothing.

She stabs the shovel into the earth and feels the searing pain as one of the blisters on her palm rips open, and she stops short, the shovel still stuck in the ground at her feet as she pulls her hands away from the handle. She looks at her hands in the dim light and sees that this apparently wasn’t the first one—the skin on her palms and fingers is swollen in several places and ripped in a few. Exhaling a shaky breath, she turns to climb out of her waist-deep hole, jamming one foot into the dirt and managing to heft herself out without pressing her hands into the dirt. She brought a med kit from Providence—she can get it from the car and bandage her hands, then wear her winter gloves over them if it helps at all. It’s not like she can quit digging yet—once the sun’s up, *someone* is bound to come along to stop her...

She’s a few rows away from the gravesite and halfway to her car when she hears movement in the darkness behind her, and she spins, her flashlight held ready as she puts her other hand on the gun tucked in her waistband. At first, she doesn’t see anything, not even a deer grazing on the lawn, but then she swings the light over again and sees a figure standing up, using a nearby headstone for support.

Her gun is out and held ready in front of her instantly, but the naked figure just waves a hand dismissively, squinting into the light.

“Stand down, Meimei,” her own voice mutters as the figure stumbles towards her across the dead, dewy grass, and May sighs in relief, lowering the flashlight and gun.

“Jesus, Jie,” she snaps, her eyes adjusting to the dark again as her older self emerges from the shadows. “I nearly—“

“I remember,” Jiejie interrupts, finally close enough to reach out and touch May, which she does, slipping a hand into her pocket and extracting the car keys. “Come on,” Jie says, moving ahead of May, “I’ll put some of your clothes on and then help you bandage your hands.”

They do that, crowding into the light from the car’s interior after the other woman dresses in clothes and shoes from May’s duffle.

“When are you here from?” May asks her older self as the woman pours the contents of a water bottle carefully over her ripped-up hands.

“Couple of months down the road,” Jie answers, ripping open an alcohol pad and dabbing at the opened blisters. May hisses through her teeth at the sting, but Jie just continues methodically, cleaning the fresh skin before covering them with band-aids where possible and gauze and bandages where it’s not.

“Does this mean you’re here to help me dig?” May asks, and her older self smirks tiredly as she finishes taping up May’s hands.

“You’ve only got one shovel,” the other woman reminds her, glancing up at her with the reminder. “But we can take turns.”
They’ve locked up the car and are walking back towards the grave before Jie speaks again.

“I couldn’t tell you about Hydra,” she says quietly, staring straight ahead even as May glances over, surprised. “I tried,” her older self continues, looking sad. “I tried every single time I came back before this. But I couldn’t say anything. Things had to happen the way they happened.”

“I know,” May says, reaching out to brush her hand once over the other woman’s.

Jiejie jumps down into the plot and takes over the digging without prompting, so May takes the chance to pull out her phone and ask for an update from Hill.

*Rallying backup to get to Providence,* the reply reads. *ETA 3 hours. AF is always slow.*

“Hill’s calling in the Air Force to go to Providence base?” she says in Jiejie’s direction, and the woman sighs as she dumps a shovelful of dirt out on the ground beside the plot. The spade of the shovel comes down hard on the next strike, and the other woman winces.

“Jie?”

Jiejie sighs again, then lets go of the shovel. She avoids May’s eyes until she turns and boosts herself out of the deepening grave, sitting down on the dirt-covered grass and looking up at May.

“Come here,” her older self says quietly, touching the ground beside her once. Nervous, May tucks her phone into her pocket and sits down beside her. Jiejie looks away, down into the grave, then sighs again before looking back up at May and beginning to speak.

“Right now, Coulson, FitzSimmons, and Trip are on their way back to Providence from Portland. They’re all fine, and Daniels is taken care of. But they’re going to get back to an empty base. Ward and Skye…”

She seems to be snagged on those words, and May’s brow furrows, her stomach sinking towards the ground.

*Did something happen to them? Was the base attacked?*

Jie takes a deep breath, closing her eyes. “Ward is piloting the Bus towards LA right now,” Jie goes on, clearly trying to keep the disgust out of her voice, “and he’s got Skye with him. She’s alive, and she’s playing it safe. He took her alive because he needs her to decrypt the hard drive with all the team’s intel on it.”

May stares at her older self, confused. “He took her alive? What is that supposed to—Why would he—Why does he need that data, and why would they be going all the way to LA—“

“He’s HYDRA, Meimei,” the other woman blurts out, pain in every syllable. She opens her eyes and grips May with a gaze that lets nothing be misunderstood. “Ward is HYDRA. Victoria’s dead. Garrett’s still alive. They played all of us, and we swallowed the lies hook, line, and sinker.”

Melinda has barely heard anything after the first two words. They’re too impossible, too unbelievable, too much after everything else she’s learned in the last week, too much…

The world tilts, discombobulating vertigo swallowing her up, and as Jie puts a stabilizing hand on her shoulder, May closes her eyes, hoping she’ll open them and find this all a nightmare.

*It can’t be…this can’t be happening*…
When she opens her eyes, things are indeed different.

For starters, it’s suddenly daylight. And she’s standing in the middle of someone’s living room.

**August 20, 2010—Skye is 20, May is 44**

She’s hunched over her laptop on the sofa when the magic-lantern moment happens. One second she’s alone with the code she’s been working on and a Poptart, the next, there’s a naked woman standing confused on the other side of the coffee table, and Skye is nearly choking on her breakfast.

“May!” she gasps as she half-inhales the bite of pastry in her mouth, coughing as she quickly sets her laptop on the coffee table and unfolds herself from the sofa, averting her eyes as May pivots, disoriented, on the living-room rug.

“Hold on,” Skye garbles, managing to swallow the food in her mouth as she hurries over to the bedroom, “I’ll get you some clothes.”

May’s eyes are still unfocused when Skye comes back in with the first clean shirt and shorts she grabbed off her bedroom floor. Her arms are wrapped protectively around her chest, but she hasn’t picked up anything to cover herself.

“Here,” Skye says, keeping her eyes on the woman’s feet as she offers her the clothes. May takes them wordlessly, seeming to be moving on autopilot as she turns her back on Skye to pull them on. Quickly, Skye crosses over to the apartment’s front door and locks it—at least if her roommate gets back sooner than expected, she’ll have a little warning when the key rattles in the lock.

May has the t-shirt on and is pulling up the shorts when Skye turns back to her.

“Are you hungry?” she asks, feeling stupid as soon as the words are out of her mouth. “I uh, have some more poptarts. Not much else, though. My roommate just went out to get groceries.”

May doesn’t say anything, her eyes remaining downcast as her hands move slowly over the drawstring of the shorts.

*She must be really, really tired…*

But then Skye notices the skin of May’s hands, the way she’s being careful with the ties…

“What happened to your hands?” Skye asks, closing the distance between them with one step and catching one of May’s hands, turning her palm up. The skin is red and raw, fresh and broken blisters dotting her fingers and palms.


May shakes her head, taking a small step back and sitting slowly down on the sofa. “They’ll get left behind. I’ll bandage them up again when I go back.”

“What did you *do*?” Skye asks, moving around the coffee table to sit down beside May on the sofa.

May looks down at her abused hands. “I was…digging,” she answers slowly.

Skye looks May’s bare arms and legs up and down. “You don’t look dirty.”

The woman shrugs. “Dirt doesn’t go with me. Nothing foreign ever does.”
Skye looks at May’s hands again and decides that she can’t just sit here seeing May in pain and do nothing.

“I’ll make you an icepack to at least take the sting off,” Skye says, climbing quickly off the sofa and moving towards the kitchen. “Do you want some coffee—I mean, well, we don’t have any tea…”

“Water?” May says from the sofa, the barest inflection making it a question.

Skye smiles as she drops ice cubes into a ziplock bag. “Coming right up.”

May has barely moved by the time Skye sets a cup of ice water on the table and passes the makeshift icepack over. The woman sets it on her knees as she reaches for the water, but she looks nauseated when she sets the glass back on the table.

“Sorry,” Skye says quickly, “I know our tap water’s not the best—“

“It’s not the water,” May interrupts quietly, and Skye sees her staring down at the ice pack held between her injured hands.

She doubts May will tell her, but it can’t hurt to try.

“What’s going on, May? Can you talk about it?

It takes May a long time to respond, and when she does, it’s in a voice that sounds as hollowed-out as she looks. “It’s been a long week. A lot of things have gone wrong.”

Skye waits, letting the silence blanket them, noticing for the first time that there is blood trickling out of the sleeve of May’s shirt.

“Someone I trusted betrayed me,” May goes on, still not looking at Skye. “And someone else that I care about thinks I betrayed him. And now a lot of things I care about are…gone.”

Skye reaches over slowly and puts her hand on May’s knee, not pulling back even after a long moment of the woman staring away in silence.

“I’m really sorry, May,” Skye whispers, squeezing her knee gently. In other circumstances, she would be happy to feel May’s skin beneath her hands. But all this situation is doing is breaking her heart. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what else to say, but I’m really sorry.”

May finally looks over at her, and it feels like this is the first time the woman really looks at her. She’s studying Skye from the top of her head down to the hand resting on her knee, and Skye self-consciously pulls away, wrapping her arm around herself.

“What’s the date?” May asks then, glancing around at the apartment, not seeming to recognize it.

“August 20, 2010,” Skye answers. The last time she saw May had been New Year’s Eve.

*Back when we…*

*When I…*

May’s chin lifts in acknowledgment. “So you’re still in Austin?”

Skye nods. *Okay, so she’s already been to the first visit in Austin…*

“Yeah, I guess you would have seen a different apartment the last time that you visited me, though.”
May nods, though it seems as emotionless as everything else she’s done so far.

“What are you doing these days?” she asks when Skye sees her eyes settle on the laptop.

“Uh, well I’ve been learning a lot in the past few months,” Skye says slowly, reaching for her laptop and pulling it onto her lap. An idea strikes her as she wakes the screen up, and she opens the webcam function, turning off the computer’s sound. “My roommate’s pretty good with computers, and I’ve been trying to soak up as much as I can.”

May nods, not looking at Skye as she sets the laptop back on the table, the brightness turned all the way down but her camera app still running. She presses the space bar to close the shutter once.

Why didn’t you just take a picture on your phone when you were together last time?

The memory of that last visit makes Skye pull her hand away, wrapping a protective arm around herself.

Is that why she’s acting weird? Because of how last time ended?

This probably isn’t the best time to ask, but there will never really be a good time…

“Uh, about that visit,” Skye says slowly. “That night, when I, uh, you know…” She trails off, waiting for May to acknowledge what she could not possibly have forgotten, but May seems to only be half-listening, staring down at her hands once again. “When I…did that… I…I know I shouldn’t have done that, and I’m sorry. I hope you’re not mad.”

“Mad about what?” May repeats, still not looking at her.

Something about those words makes a space open up in Skye’s chest.

She doesn’t remember.

Because she doesn’t care?

Because it wasn’t important enough to remember?

Because you’ve had the wrong idea the whole time?

“The next time you see me will be May 22, next year,” May suddenly says quietly, seeming to be falling back on reciting the facts, apparently the only thing substantial enough for her to grip.

Skye nods, thinking of the worn-out paper that she has kept hidden in the back of her underwear drawer since she moved into this apartment. She has noticed that there isn’t much space left on it...

The sound of a knob turning and encountering the lock makes them both look towards the front door, and Skye hears her roommate curse once as he fumbles for his keys.

“May 22,” May repeats in a whisper, her hand brushing Skye’s as the door swings open and Skye sees Miles bending to pick up another grocery sack on the other side of the threshold. When he straightens up, he looks surprised to see company on the sofa, and Skye quickly jumps up to run interference.

“Hey,” Skye says, hopping across the rug to take a bag of groceries from him. “This is my friend, May. She came over right after you left,” she says to him, turning away from what she knows is a lean for a kiss and facing May to introduce him to her.
But based on the look on May’s face, that won’t be necessary.

“Oh, hey, Miles,” May says slowly, a knowing look in her eye and the closest thing to a smile Skye has seen all day ghosting across her face.

“Hey,” Miles says, obviously confused but not confused enough to ask questions. He just kicks the door shut and brushes past Skye and carries the grocery sacks to the kitchen. “Skye, they didn’t have any chunky peanut butter today, but I got you some of the creamy kind…”

“Thanks, Miles,” Skye calls, starting to follow him but stopping in her tracks as she sees May get up and move quickly towards the bathroom that opens off the living room. The door closes solidly behind her, and Skye swallows once, turning away.

*Maybe she just needs to use it. Or maybe she just needed a minute to herself.*

But when nearly five minutes pass, the groceries are all put away, and May still hasn’t emerged, Skye wanders over and knocks quietly on the door.

“May?” she calls in. “You all right?” She can feel Miles watching from the kitchen behind her.

When she calls a second time and there’s no answer again, Skye puts her hand on the nob and turns it slowly. The light is on, so she can clearly see her clothes lying empty on the floor.

Skye bites her lip, something sharp twisting inside her ribs. She feels her eyes filling with tears and tries to distract herself by picking up the shirt and shorts off the floor, folding them over her arms as she bats a persistent tear off her cheek, embarrassed at herself.

“Wait a second, is she not in there?” Miles is saying, suddenly close behind her, and Skye ducks her head, dodging him on her way back towards the bedroom, where she throws the clothes hard into the hamper.

“No. I guess she left when we weren’t looking,” Skye mutters, facing away from the bedroom door and trying hard to get herself under control.

*You’ve watched May disappear dozens of times before…it shouldn’t hurt this much…*

She hears Miles coming into the bedroom behind her, and she reaches up to smear the tears off her cheeks again, swallowing hard.

“Skye?” he says quietly, one hand smoothing gently over her shoulder as he steps around beside her.

“What is it?”

Skye stares down at her own folded arms for a minute, then turns into Miles and buries herself in his chest. His arms go around her automatically, pulling her into an embrace that is warm and protective and the best he can do as the dam breaks and she muffles a sob behind one hand, tears soaking into his shirt.

“Hey, hey, it’s all right,” he says gently, and she knows he has no idea what is wrong or what he can do to fix it, but right now he’s doing the only thing she needs.

Being there. Not letting go.

Not leaving.
Jiejie is still there as she tumbles back into the winter dawn, falling straight down into a hole that is significantly deeper than when she left. The woman tosses the shovel aside and helps May dress in the relative privacy of the pit, offering her one article of clothing at a time and helping May with the buttons on her jeans before wrapping her hands in fresh bandages.

“You got lucky, disappearing like that,” the other woman says as she wraps the bindings around May’s palms. “I got all the hard work done—“

May’s free hand seizes a handful of Jie’s hair and hauls her head down just as she brings her knee up, slamming the other woman’s forehead hard into her kneecap. Jie reacts as May would—of course she does—and gets one arm around the back of May’s raised leg while throwing her weight forward, taking the hit but still coming out on top as she knocks May over, throwing them both down into the dirt. May is swinging hard at her head as Jie comes down on top of her, but Jie dodges it, though she misses May’s leg coming up to kick her in the back of the head, confusing her enough that May grabs her by the hair again and gets one solid blow across her face, one that makes her knuckles come away bloody. Jie still catches her fist before it comes back across, twisting May’s other arm until they’re both immobilized like a straitjacket.

“Enough!” Jie snaps, the hair hanging in her face parted just enough that May can see the blood dripping from her lip. May presses back against the force, but Jie is stronger, forcing her back down on the ground. “Just stop, Melinda,” she pants as May stares into her own eyes. “Just…stop.”

They remain in that position for a long moment, until Jie seems certain that May isn’t going to pounce again and releases her hands, rolling off of her body and lying down in the dirt beside her.

"You really think it helps when you do shit like that?” her older self grumbles, and in the corner of her eye May can see her dabbing at her lip with the back of her hand.

It takes the edge off, she answers mentally, but she knows the truth, just like Jie does.

It's not a cancellation, it's a transfer. It's just reserving the pain for later.

The plot isn’t really wide enough for two, so they’re crammed shoulder to shoulder in the dirt, breathing slowly and intentionally as the sky slowly slides towards dawn above them.

“How could you not tell me?” May whispers, staring up at the sky as the stars wink out one by one. Beside her, Jiejie sighs heavily, shaking her head.

“Same reason I didn’t tell you how all this was going to start,” she answers. “It’s not that I don’t want to. It’s just that there’s only one way things happen. And there’s no changing a future that is already someone’s past.”

It’s a concept that May has been over a thousand times in her head, trying to work out the impossibility that the woman in front of her is not a separate person…not her own being with her own history—she’s herself. Just herself plus a few extra months and all the changes those brought. A herself that already remembers this night and all the days that have followed, still in the future for May.

"I didn't see it," Jie says beside her, each syllable laden with regret. "You didn't see it. I've been over every memory hundreds of times by now—he did everything right. He fooled us; we failed. You can't keep beating yourself up for that. Not when he's still out there needing to be stopped, not when your team is still out there needing you."
May thinks of the teammates she walked away from, thinks of the choices that led her here. It was never a permanent departure, but the tasks waiting if she goes back suddenly feel so much more daunting.

*How much more am I going to have to endure in a single year? How much more can I take?*

*SHIELD has fallen.*

*Fury’s dead.*

*Coulson thinks you’re a traitor.*

*Ward is one.*

*Victoria’s dead.*

*Ward has Skye…* 

“Is it going to get better?” she asks slowly, feeling her throat closing up, the pain of all the bad news finally avalanching onto her.

Beside her, Jie touches her hand, and May looks over at herself. She doesn’t look great with a split lip, but her reply seems confident enough.

“So much better,” the woman answers, moving her hand to brush the backs of her fingers once against May’s cheek. “As soon as you’re willing to let it. As soon as you decide to stop wasting time.”

May isn’t sure what that’s supposed to mean, but she doesn’t have time to ask.

“I’m about to go,” Jie says, sitting up, and May quickly sits up too.

“You don’t have much further to dig,” Jie says, pointing to a part of the hole at their feet, where a small section is cut a little deeper, exposing the dull surface of a coffin. “When you get it open, the USB is in the lining near the head. After that, call Hill for Stark air traffic clearance codes and get yourself to L.A. You’ve still got more to do, Meimei.”

Maybe it’s the remorse over attacking her, or maybe it’s just the obvious need for comfort, but May suddenly gives in and leans towards Jie, wrapping the other woman into a tight embrace.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers to herself. Even through the layers of clothing, she can feel their twin heartbeats pressing against one another.

“Me too,” her own voice whispers back, the embrace tightening in tandem apology.

And then she feels the solidness disappear in a single instant, and she’s the only body left in the grave.
January 6, 2014—Skye is 24, May is 44

If she had better luck, she would still be unconscious.

Her head is fuzzy, and when she shifts, the first pain that registers is the one on her neck. She can tell that she’s lying on something hard and cold, and based on the way the two colliding voices are bouncing in the space around her, she guesses it must be the cargo hold of the Bus.

“You let her get one over on you. That’s what Garrett was afraid of.”

“And Garrett told you to stay out of sight.”

Mike.

Ward.

And just like that, the weight of the last 12 hours crashes on her all over again.

Koenig’s open throat dripping blood from a closet shelf above her. Scrubbing her hands clean and scratching the message into the bathroom’s scrolling picture screen, jamming in a screwdriver and hoping another teammate noticed it when they got back to the base. Breathing slowly and intentionally until she trusted herself to speak without her voice shaking and touch Ward without trembling.

She had wanted to believe that May would suddenly appear, sent by whatever force of nature brought her back into Skye’s life right on time, right when she needed her most…

But clearly, she couldn’t count on that. This time, she was on her own.

She’d played a part, trying to be exactly what Ward expected to see, and he had bought it without a trace of suspicion. She hadn’t known until they were airborne what he had wanted from her, but once he said it, it all made sense.

It all came back to the hard drive.

Fortunately, sitting down in Ruthie’s diner in LA gave her exactly the opportunity she needed to crack her laptop and call for help, all the while double-locking the drive (as if she couldn’t have opened it in minutes) and packing a Trojan horse into it just in case someone got back to Hydra with it anyway. She’d used the same trick she’d once used on May to snag a photo of Ward and alert the local authorities, but she hadn’t even been able to enjoy wearing down his patience and visibly winding him up. He apparently had just enough feelings for her…or something…to keep believing
every lie she delivered through those tense hours in the diner, in the same booth where she had sat with Mike Petersen only a few months ago.

“Would you tell Garrett to rot in hell?” she had asked, just before turning her laptop around so he could see the search warrant out on the FBI website.

He hadn’t reacted at all, just looked at her, calm as a cobra.

“Hail Hydra,” she whispered as the cops approached them, deciding that she could be satisfied if those were the last words she ever said to him.

It was supposed to be out of her hands from there. But of course, she should have known two average blues weren’t enough to hold back does-not-even-deserve-to-be-called-Agent Grant Ward. When he’d taken the entire detail out, she had stolen a police car. She actually stole a police car in an attempt to put some—any—distance between herself and him.

And then, completing the circle, Mike Petersen (a real, live superhero!) had appeared like the fairy fucking godmother, landing on the hood of the moving car and shattering the windshield with one punch so that he could seize her by the throat.

*Explains why you blacked out.*

*Explains why your neck is killing you…*

“Garrett ordered me to shadow you,” Mike is saying to Ward now. Skye can hear the whir of the mechanics in his leg as he moves, probably circling Ward. “He knew that you had a soft spot for Skye, and that she might take advantage of it.”

*Well, then he’s a smarter man than his pet psychopath…*

“Well he was wrong,” Ward snaps back, and Skye opens her eyes to see him glaring down at her. *Liar.* “We have her. Once she gives us the location we’ll be off.”

But she’s done with lies today. “Yeah that’s not going to happen,” she grumbles, opening her eyes and looking up at the two of them. They can torture her if they want to. They’ll have to do quite a lot to hurt her more than the betrayal raging in her ribs.

Ward glances over at Mike. “Take a walk. I can handle this,” he orders with authority that he surely doesn’t have here.

“Can you?” Skye sneers, staggering to her feet, willing her head to clear completely. “You haven’t so far.”

Mike’s gaze goes unfocused for a second, and Skye guesses that he’s reading a message in his eye cam. *Mike…please,* she begs with her eyes, failing to make him look at her. *You’re not on his side…you’re nothing like them…*

“Garrett says you have five minutes,” Mike says, turning a cold gaze on Ward. He doesn’t look back as he clunks up the stairs, so Skye finally lets her gaze turn towards Ward as he approaches her.

He doesn’t look even a bit remorseful. “I can explain—“

The thin line holding her back snaps.
“You lying bastard!” she snarls, hurling herself at him and swinging at every part of him she can reach, shoving him off balance and cracking her knuckles across his jaw. “You son of a bitch! You lying—“

He grabs her fists, seeming barely more than annoyed by her outburst as he easily immobilizes her arms in his grip.

“Stop!” he shouts over her, leaning close to her face as he forces both her fists down below her chin. His eyes are bright, but it’s not with concern. “Okay? It’s over. You can’t win.”

She stares at him for a long second, remembering of every moment they spent together training, every teasing jab that she had lobbed at him to try to get him to lighten up, every impatient glower and imparted secret that had built something resembling affection in her heart, nothing like what she felt for May and still nothing like she felt for Fitz and Simmons, but something strong enough to make her want to protect him, help him, save him from being the person she had once been…

Liar.

Liar.

Liar.

Her hands seize the collar of his shirt, and she hopes he sees her snarl right before her skull cracks his nose with the force of her whole body behind it. The sound the impact makes is almost enough to satisfy one iota of her fury.

Ward cries out when his head snaps back but doesn’t let go of her wrists until he has her handcuffed to the rail of the spiral staircase. He leaves her there as he cleans the blood off his face, then strides back to her and tries to make excuses.

“All this time. Everything we’ve been through—“ Skye wheezes, barely able to speak around the flames in her chest. “Why? How could you?

“I was on a mission,” he says, towering over her and staring unflinchingly into her eyes. “It wasn’t personal.”

“It wasn’t—“ she starts to repeat, amazed that she feels herself becoming even angrier. There can’t be any space left in her at this point—if her rage gets any hotter, she’ll probably actually combust. “You did not just say that! It wasn’t personal?!?” Her voice is nearly shredded.

“Skye, listen to me,” he says levelly, his hands hovering a few inches away from her shoulders. “I’m a spy; I had a job.”

“You killed I don’t even know how many people…”

Koenig. Victoria Hand. Thomas Nash. How many other bodies dotted his trail?

“Are you going to kill me now?” she demands, drawing herself up fearlessly.

This, of all things, is the question that seems to surprise him. “No,” he answers immediately. “I would never hurt you. You know how I feel about you, Skye.”

She was wrong. There is room in her chest for more anger, but it’s competing hard with disgust for the remaining real estate.
“So even though you’ve been lying to everyone about everything,” she says slowly “…You’re saying that your feelings for me…”

He takes a step closer, his hands coming up to rest on the sides of her face, pressing her hair against her skin. The only thing keeping her from stepping away is her hope that she can hit him one more time.

“They’re real, Skye,” he says solemnly, staring into her eyes. “They always have been.”

She stares back at him and realizes that she can’t call bullshit on this. And that makes it a million times worse.

“I’m going to throw up,” she mutters, not even exaggerating, drawing back and putting the stairs’ railing between them, breathing deeply and trampling down on the bile rising up in her throat. When she looks up again, the anger in his eyes looks like it could rival her own.

“Do you think this has been easy for me?” he snaps, leaning across the rail, eyes sharp. “Do you have any idea how hard it was? The sacrifices the decisions that I had to make?”

It takes everything she has in her not to roll her eyes, but she keeps staring at him, desperate to understand what could have made this worth it for him.

“But I made them,” he goes on, “because that’s what I do. I’m a survivor.”

There it is.

That’s how he could do this.

That’s what he tells himself at the end of the day—he’s a survivor.

She knows the difference a mantra can make—You will make it, Skye; you already did—and she looks him in the eye and puts a stick of dynamite to his.

“You are a serial killer,” she says soundly. “And I will never ever give you what you want.”

She sits down on the steps and doesn’t say another word until Ward moves silently out of the room. She immediately sets to work on her handcuffs once she’s alone, but she had forgotten that they only had five minutes.

She hears Mike’s leg before she sees him entering right behind Ward, hard-drive in hand.

“Time’s up,” Ward announces, marching straight up to her. “You can tell me where to unlock the drive, or you can tell him,” he says, pointing at Mike.

Finally, a good chance…

“Mike,” Skye says quietly, trying not to think about what happened right after the last time she saw him face-to-face. “I know you don’t want to do this.”

“It’s not up to me.”

“Yes, it is. I don’t care what they did to you. You’re still Mike Petersen. You’re still a father. You have a son.”

“Who I left in your hands,” he snaps, finally looking her in the eye, emotion showing in his good one. “I asked you to look after him, Skye. Where is he now?”
“He’s with his aunt under the protection of a SHIELD team—“ she answers quickly, remembering the arrangements made after Petersen had disappeared.

“And what is SHIELD today?” Mike snaps, and Skye falls silent, understanding his fear. “Hydra can hurt my son any time they want,” Mike goes on, the frustration evident now, “and if I get any funny ideas about rescuing him, they push a little button and blow a hole in my skull.”

“FitzSimmons will figure out a way,” she attempts.

“No!” he snaps. “There’s no way out of this, Skye. Tell us how to unlock the drive.”

“No! You could have shot me back in Italy, but you didn’t,” she says, falling back on the proof that she knows is the key. “They made Quinn do it because there’s still good in you, Mike. And I don’t think you’re going to hurt me.”

Mike stares at her for a long moment with both eyes, breathing slowly.

“You’re right,” he finally says. “I won’t hurt you.”

He suddenly raises one arm towards Ward and fires a small device from the mechanism on his arm. A silver capsule slams into Ward’s chest, and she hears the pulse of an electric shark. Ward immediately crumples like a puppet with his strings cut, his breath sticking in his chest, his limbs rigid.

“What did you do to him?” Skye gasps, unable to take her eyes off Ward.

“Stopped his heart,” Mike says calmly. “It isn’t beating. He’s having a heart attack. You can restart it or not. Your choice.”

Ward is spasming on the ground, not even able to gasp, but she thinks he’s mouthing her name.

“You think I don’t want to watch him suffer?” she sneers, staring down at him, unable to ignore the satisfaction she feels at his pain.

“Not suffer,” Mike corrects her. “Die. Garrett doesn’t think you’re going to let that happen.”

Skye stares at the man at their feet, thinking of the trail of bodies he’s left behind himself. “He’s a murderer,” she says, not sure if she’s telling Mike or herself.

“Yes. He is,” Mike says calmly. “Are you?”

She stares at Ward until he isn’t moving anymore. It’s enough time for her to run through every reason she knows that he deserves to die and every future where she is the one who killed him for her own satisfaction.

None of them are satisfying enough to keep her from giving in.

“Okay stop!” she blurts out, grabbing at Mike’s arm. She will be the only one in the room without blood on her hands. “Bring him back. It’s not based on latitude and longitude, it’s altitude.”

Mike restarts Ward’s heart, then puts her to work on her computer in the lab. Ward staggers to the cockpit, and the plane is ready and rolling down the runway only a few minutes later. She hacks the drive while they idle on the runway and is in the middle of setting up her Trojan horse when Mike comes in to check her progress and then puts her in the Cage without another word. She’s in there while the plane takes off in vertical flight mode, counting back through all the mistakes she’s made in
the past twenty-four hours. She doesn’t know what they plan to do with her once the hack is completed, whether they’ll toss her out with (or without) a parachute or take her with them to… wherever they’re headed…

When the door opens not long after they seem to stop climbing, though, it’s not Mike or Ward coming in for her.

It’s Coulson.

She’s so surprised that she throws her arms around him in relief. She has questions but no time for them; he has plans but no idea that Deathlok is on the plane. All plans of taking back the plane evaporate as soon as Mike appears over Coulson’s shoulder.

“Change of plans,” he whispers, spinning and pulling out his gun. “Run!”

He catches up with her in the cargo hold as the ramp is opening, and she’s trying to get a parachute on correctly with her laptop in a backpack on her chest. He shouts at her to get in the car instead, and between the storm of bullets the front fender releases (none of which seem to hit Ward, damn it) and the bullets Ward and Mike fire right back at them, and Coulson reverses them out of the plane. At 35,000 feet.

The next few moments are a blur, and Skye is pretty sure she screams through most of them. The time they spend in free-fall feels like hours, and Lola’s thrusters barely come to life in time to slow their descent and bring them to a graceless landing in front of LA’s Marriot hotel. Skye is pretty sure every function of her body went offline somewhere around 20,000 feet; she can’t speak or move. It’s not until Coulson is hefting her backpack onto his own shoulder and tugging her by her elbow that she realizes she hasn’t heard a word he’s said since the car thudded onto terra firma again.

“Skye, come on—“ he’s saying urgently, hauling her up out of the passenger seat. He’s dropping a cell phone back into his pocket when she finally looks over at him. “You’re going to go with them, and I’m going to meet up with you later at a safe place outside of town.”

It takes her a minute to get her words working again. “Go with who?” she manages, looking around at the oblivious civilians moving past them, and Coulson points up the road.

A plain, silver sedan with tinted windows pulls out of traffic and rolls to a stop in front of them on the street. The window of the shotgun seat rolls down just enough for her to catch a glimpse of Simmons’ concerned eyes in the passenger seat, and Skye’s heart nearly dissolves in relief.

Coulson quickly opens the back door and puts her bag on the seat, pushing her carefully into the car, and she collapses into the seat, barely able to control her own limbs.

“I’ll see you in a little bit,” Coulson says as he closes the door, already moving back towards the Corvette.

“Oh, Skye thank God,” Simmons is saying, turning around in her seat and reaching for Skye’s hand. “We’ve been so worried—“

Maybe it’s the touch of her friend’s hand in hers after feeling only the rough hands of two men who she had once called friends, maybe it’s the rush of silence in the bubble of the car that stands in stark contrast to the roar of atmosphere from two minutes before, maybe it’s the sight of the whole world still moving around them like nothing is burning, like there isn’t a flaming emptiness inside of her…

But whatever the reason or combination thereof, it’s apparently just what Skye needs to finally let
everything come rushing out.

She’s not sure where they are or how far they’ve driven by the time she gets herself under control enough to look around—she’s not even sure at what point Simmons had unbuckled her seatbelt and climbed over the console and into the backseat with Skye to pull her into a stabilizing embrace. It’s only when Skye’s tears are soaking into the shoulder of her sweater and the light around them has softened into the late-afternoon glow that Skye finally looks around and notices one other thing she should have seen sooner.

“Fitz,” she croaks out. “You’re driving.”

In the front seat, Fitz’s hands are white on the steering wheel. “Yep,” he answers, voice tight, “And it’s taking all my concentration to keep right, so don’t mind me up here.”

“We’re going to a motel out on the west side,” Simmons says, stroking Skye’s hair and answering the unasked question. “Trip was with Hill facing down Ward at the airstrip before the Bus took off, and he’s already gone ahead and made sure it’s safe. Coulson is probably going to hide his car, but then he’ll meet us back there.”

“And May?” Skye asks, hating herself for caring.

The moment of bewildered silence is her answer. “No one’s heard from her since Providence,” Jemma finally says, and Skye forces herself to nod.

She shouldn’t be surprised, at this point.

This still isn’t over. And until it is, May said she was on her own.

May:

It’s nearly sundown when she lands the Stark Industries plane at the corporate airfield in the desert ridges outside of LA. The place seems deserted as she disembarks, but she feels the hairs on the back of her neck standing up with the presence of another person. As her eyes sweep the lot a second time though, she sees Maria emerging from the shadows outside the hangar.

“Whenever you’re ready, Agent May,” Hill says impatiently, jerking her head towards a black sedan waiting in the lot, and May can’t believe it wasn’t even twenty-four hours ago that they were talking in DC.

The drive into the city is nearly silent, broken only by small questions and short answers as they fill one another in.

“Where are they?”

“Motel in Encino. Dropped Trip off first, others should be there by now.”

“Ward?”

“Still flying your plane.”

“What happened at Providence?”

“I got SHIELD on the Air Force’s shit list. What happened in DC?”

“I found out the truth.”
The miles slide past outside, and May debates saying something about Victoria Hand. She’s sure she doesn’t know anything that Maria doesn’t too, but it seems irreverent to not at least mention their mutual loss.

Tender words were never her strong suit, though, so she doesn’t attempt them.

“You going to stay with Stark?” she asks as Hill steers the car in a wide loop around downtown L.A., avoiding the metropolitan chaos as they head towards the west side.

“I can do a lot more good with his resources and his nonexistent oversight than I can by staying with you all,” Hill answers quietly, her eyes only moving from the road to check the mirrors for tails, which she’s been doing often. “It’s far from selling out.”

There’s a long pause before Hill follows it with her own question.

“You going to stay with Coulson after you deliver your intel?”

May sighs and leans back against the seat, watching the city of angels roll past in a glow of orange light.

“If they want me.”

“They?”

She doesn’t say anything else for the rest of the drive, and Maria doesn’t even need to check a map to bring their car straight up to a seedy motel wrapping around a shallow, gated pool.

“I’m going to go in and talk to Coulson first,” Hill says, sending a text message from a burner phone. “You can slip in the back while I keep him busy.”

May nods, reaching into the backseat for her bag.

“You going to be all right?” she asks, pausing with her hand on the handle.

“Don’t worry about me,” Hills says quietly, still not looking over at her, and May reminds herself that she’s now talking to the highest-ranking (former?) SHIELD agent she knows who is still alive. Someone who has been through all the same things she has in the past week.

They both lost Hand. They both lost Fury. They both lost SHIELD.

The need to say something comforting presses down on her tongue again, but May can’t come up with anything that doesn’t sound stupid even to herself. She opens the car door and plants her feet on the ground with a quick three-sixty sweep, but pauses when Hill catches her with one last request.

“When you find Ward,” Hill says gravely behind her, each word so precise that May knows they’ve been fine-cut with well-controlled rage, “give him one from me too.”

May looks back at her, their eyes meeting for the first time, and May sees for the briefest second the flicker of the hurt that mirrors her own. The woman is a few years younger than her, but she was just as invested in SHIELD, if not more. Agent Hill lost multiple co-agents and her job and her purpose, but Maria lost her family and her home. The long look that they share feels like a handshake, a solemn goodbye said with only a nod before May turns away and climbs out of the car, shutting the door firmly and circling quickly around to the back of the motel.

Hill’s request is simple, and she can’t wait to make good on it. She’s not sure if the request meant a
bruise, a broken bone, or a bullet, but May is certain she can manage all three.

**Skye:**

She and Jemma have each claimed beds in one of the rooms while Fitz and Trip move in on the other side of the room’s open adjoining door. No one has said much except for quick murmured updates from each other’s missions. Simmons has now filled her in on everything since they last saw each other—Coulson’s old flame the Cellist and her supernatural stalker, the return to the empty base and their discovery of her message and Koenig’s body, the ambush by the Air Force and Maria Hill, and the quick turnaround that sent them flying towards LA. Coulson has made it in too, but he’s shut himself up in his own room on the other side of Skye and Jemma’s, and they figure he doesn’t need to be bothered right now.

Skye has showered and is rummaging through the clothes that Jemma brought—their departure from Providence had been hasty, so Simmons only has the bag of clothes that she had taken on the quinjet to Portland.

“Is it okay if I borrow this one?” Skye asks, holding up a t-shirt from the bag.

Jemma, who is in the middle of dialing a number on the landline, looks up and nods. “What’s mine is yours,” she says with a small smile before bending back over the keypad.

“Thanks,” Skye says, turning away and stripping off her sweat-soaked flannel shirt. Picking up the clean shirt and underwear, she carries them towards the bathroom, where she’s hoping a hot shower will help douse the lingering embers in her chest. Before she shuts the door, she sees Jemma sag in relief, closing her eyes and exhaling into the phone.

“Hi Mum,” she says, a little breathlessly. “I’m sorry, I know it’s awfully late. Yes, it’s me. I’m sorry I didn’t call sooner—“

Skye closes the bathroom door soundly and locks it behind her.

Not everything can—or should—be shared.

**May:**

It’s nearly midnight when Coulson finally comes back into his room, his reaction the best she could have hoped for.

“I hoped you would come back.”

She breathes a sigh of relief internally and brushes aside his words about Ward. He needs to know why she left and what she found.

“There’s something you need to see.”

After the message from the head of the TAHITI project director—Coulson himself—plays, a long silence stretches, filling up the room with his bewilderment.

There is simultaneously everything and nothing to say, so she’s not surprised that when Coulson finally speaks, it has nothing to do with the video they both just watched.

“How did you get to DC from Providence?”
May sits down slowly on the bed nearest to the desk. “Walked until my mother came and picked me up. Hit up my safehouse in New York and stole a car there. Once I found the intel this morning, Hill got me here.”

He doesn’t need to know about all the extra layers time-travel added to that story.

He fills her in on his side, everything from Portland to Providence to plummeting into LA from 35,000 feet.

“I can’t believe Ward has my plane,” she mutters at that part, and Coulson looks over at her, attempting a tired smile.

“We’ll get it back,” he promises. “And when that happens, you’ll get a chance to tell him how you feel.”

When he runs out of story, they lapse into a weary silence. May taps her foot softly to keep herself awake, picking at the dirt under her nails.

“How are the others doing?” she finally asks, unable to make herself name the one she cares most about.

Coulson sighs. “Fitzsimmons are all business—Fitz probably took the truth about Ward the hardest. Trip is definitely upset, ready to do something, but mostly just glad he’s with us now.”

“And Skye?” she asks, wondering if he left her out just to make her say her name.

But he only shrugs. “She’s dealing in her own way.”

May stares his direction again.

“That’s not what I meant.”

Coulson looks over at her, and she wills him not to make her say it. He doesn’t.

“He didn’t hurt her, May.”

Internally May breathes a sigh of relief, looking away again.

“Then how did he make her unlock the hard drive?”

“He couldn’t. So Deathlok snapped a cardiac arrester on him and gave Skye ten seconds to tell the truth before Ward died.”

May stares straight ahead, absorbing this fact.

After everything that’s happened…

“I’m sure she’ll be glad to see you,” he says in a voice that tells her that he won’t let her dodge that face-to-face tomorrow. It’s a weak comfort, but she appreciates the effort this time.

“I’ll be glad to see all of them.”

Coulson stands, untucking his shirt and beginning to unbutton it. “Well, dawn will come around soon enough. I assume we’ll all congregate for breakfast tacos.”

May almost smiles as she reaches down to pull off her shoes. “Twenty years of missions, and that
might be a first."

Coulson has moved over to the bathroom door, flicking on the white fluorescent light inside. “I’m going to shower. You should sleep. I’d suggest that you go bunk with the girls, but I think you ought to give them some space…”

“I agree,” she says quickly, thinking of the last thing she said to Skye when she left. She has no problems putting that conversation off until morning.

“Take whichever bed you want,” he calls as he shuts the bathroom door.

She takes the one closer to the window, but only after dead-bolting the door and slipping a pistol beneath her pillow. A day of walking and a night of digging are apparently enough to outweigh any thoughts that would have kept her awake on most other nights. She tumbles into the oblivion of sleep without protest, waking only when a sliver of light peeks between the curtains the next morning. She’s in exactly the same spot she fell asleep in, Phil is sleeping soundly in the bed across from her, and she decides she can call it progress.

January 7, 2014—Skye is 24, May is 44

She still hasn’t slept.

Well, not really.

Dozing off a few feet from Jemma should have been peaceful, a small dose of something like “old times”, even though the last time they slept in the same room was back before Quinn shot her in Italy. She doesn’t know what time she fell asleep, but it’s barely after midnight when she jerks awake from a dream where the bullets searing through her body had come from a man that until yesterday she had thought was a friend.

She never gets back to sleep.

Eventually, she quits trying and gets her laptop and scrolls listlessly through pages, checking the news for any signs of Hydra in other places, for Mike, for Garrett or Ward. She works on the Trojan horse worm that she had barely finished yesterday, getting the remaining code finished and everything installed in a USB. She wipes and reprograms her phone.

Jemma is still sleeping soundly as dawn finally lightens the world outside, and eventually she hears Coulson’s door on the other side of their wall open and close once. Deciding that there can’t be anything to lose from talking everything out with him, she closes her laptop and pulls on her jeans, slipping a key card into her pocket.

But it’s not Coulson she finds standing at the edge of the pool in the gray early morning, nursing a hot drink.

It’s May.

The woman turns over her shoulder as Skye steps out, seeming equally surprised to see her. She’s dressed in the same activewear that Skye has seen dozens of times before, as if she’s just been up doing a morning workout.

As if nothing at all has happened.

“Skye,” May says in a low voice, immediately turning completely around and taking a step towards
her. “I’m so glad you’re—“

Skye doesn’t hear the rest.

She barrels into May at top speed, tucking one elbow down as she collides with the woman more than hard enough to knock her off balance…straight into the pool.

The splash is large and satisfying, which Skye takes to mean that she managed to genuinely catch May off-guard. She catches her balance before she goes in after her, heart thudding even at the thought of ending up in the water. May bobs back up almost immediately, gasping and splashing, smearing the water out of her eyes and immediately focusing on Skye, panting at the water’s edge.

“Okay,” May says calmly, holding Skye’s gaze as she kicks beneath the water once, one strong pull of her arms bringing her up to the edge of the pool in front of Skye. “I deserved that. Is there anything else you want to say?”

Skye glares down at May, trying to decide where to start, and as the woman raises her arms out of the water and folds them on the edge of the pool, Skye sees that both hands are bandaged, her palms and fingers wrapped in now-soggy strips of—

“I was digging.”

She falls to her knees at the side of the pool, reaching for one of May’s hands just like she did the last time, pulling the loosened bandage off and staring at the same wounds she saw 4 years ago in her apartment in Austin…

And in an instant, it’s as though Skye herself is doused with water, the flames in her chest going out with a hiss as the memory rushes to the surface, the visit when May had seemed upset and distracted and absolutely torn up inside…

“Goddammit, May,”

She raises her head, and one look at May tells her that she’s right, that May has been other places, but somehow, she was still with her.

“Where were you digging?” she demands, forcing herself to stay upright. “Where have been?”

May tells her.

May:

She stays in the water as she tells Skye about her last 48 hours—it’s a heated pool, so it’s warmer than getting out and being soaking wet in the cool January air. Morning slowly fills the world around them, and she figures that this might be the first time she has been sunk in the ground for two sunrises in a row. The others don’t emerge even with the morning; she sees Phil peek around the curtain once, but she gestures with her eyes for him to give them a minute. Skye listens as she tells her about Ontario, New York City, DC, the cemetery…

“Did you find what you were looking for?” Skye finally asks when she tells her about unearthing the coffin (mentioning the part about Jiejie in a whisper).

May nods, looking away and praying that Skye won’t ask for specifics. “Yes. He knows the truth he needs to know.”
Skye waits in silence for a long minute, and May eventually looks up at her.

“So what are you going to do now?”

May offers a thin-lipped smile. “First? Take down Garrett and Ward.”

Skye’s dark eyes hold her own, an obvious challenge. “And then what?”

The implied question might as well be cut out in the air between them.

*Are you staying?*

May takes a deep breath. “I’ll stay where I’m needed,” she answers, holding Skye’s gaze.

“Are you ever going to let yourself stay where you’re wanted?”

The words are so gentle, almost shy, that May feels like there’s something she’s missing here.

“Sometimes they’re not the same thing,” she responds honestly.

Skye’s gaze drops towards the ground between them. “They could be.”

Again, there’s that niggling feeling that May is missing something, so she presses in with her own words that have been avoided until now.

“What I said to you when I left Providence,” she begins hesitantly, “I’m not asking for you to excuse it. I was harsh when I didn’t have to be, and I’m sorry. I didn’t know that I was leaving you with a murderer—I had no idea…” she trails off, closing her eyes and imagining all over again all the ways she will hurt Ward when she sees him again.

“When our team first picked you up in this city a few months ago,” she goes on, marveling all over again how much has happened in not-even-half a year, “I tried to convince Coulson not to let you stay with us.” She doesn’t have the heart to look at the girl as she tells her this, so she focuses instead on the concrete between them. “He tried to defend you, saying that you had kept calm in a stressful situation that you weren’t prepared for and acted creatively to give yourself a chance to escape, and I reminded him that we had to run in and save you because you were in over your head. Kind of the same thing that happened yesterday.”

She forces herself to look up at the girl then, attempting a teasing expression. Skye’s brow is furrowed, but she seems to be listening intently.

“I know I was afraid of you, though—I was afraid of what you knew that I didn’t. I was afraid of what my presence in your past meant for my future. So I tried to make Coulson see that you weren’t trained, that you were a liability, a risk, something we couldn’t plan for or predict…”

Skye makes a face at her, and May smiles.

“You still *are* those things, Skye,” May says sincerely, “but those are the things that I know have made all the difference. It’s the reason our team has made it through certain things. It’s the reason we’re all here now. What I’m trying to say is…whatever the reason for it is, I’m glad you’re here. I’m glad I was wrong about you.”

She doesn’t know what to say in the long silence following a confession like that, but Skye just smiles and reaches for one of her hands, covering it gently with her own.

“Thank you,” she whispers, a shy smile hinted at on her lips. May offers her own smile back, and
Skye’s bursts into full bloom. “Sorry I pushed you in the pool,” the girl says sheepishly.

“Again, it was the least I deserved,” May says, smirking as she pushes back from the wall towards the center of the pool. “I really ought to get the teacup off the bottom, though…”

The team burns the entire day at the motel, and she feels like it might be exactly what everyone needed. Though the motel itself doesn’t have much to offer, it’s nice to have a stable place, a tiny little bubble in the middle of the chaos outside.

She’s surprised by everyone else’s excited reactions when they see her at breakfast that morning, and she can tell that something is different, but this time in a good way. They’re all still feeling the heaviness of the last few days, but they all seem as ready to do something as they are to take a breather.

Once Trip gets back with the breakfast tacos, Coulson sets everyone to work with different tasks, mostly related to hunting for Garrett. Skye tracks down any SHIELD intel still circling on the interwebs while the rest of them pore over old mission files (which Skye had had the foresight to dump on her laptop when she was pretending to hack the hard drive), compiling connections and looking for common threads. Coulson sends Trip out on a “supply run”, and May keeps her smirk to herself, knowing exactly what he wants Trip to come back with.

Someone calls in takeout for dinner, and May isn’t surprised when Skye starts yawning even before the food is gone. She hasn’t said anything, but May knows the way a sleepless night looks on someone. She can probably guess what Skye dreamed about.

Coulson and Fitz are cleaning up the food containers and Simmons is organizing the chaos of papers when Skye finally caves in and curls up on her side on the bed beside May, still scrolling through the mission data that everyone else has in printed form. Her back rests against May’s hip, so May doesn’t realize that she’s fallen asleep until Coulson comes over and carefully moves Skye’s hand off the trackpad and shuts the laptop.

“Let’s call it a night, everyone,” he says to the rest of them as he sets her computer on the nightstand, and no one protests.

“Would you rather sleep in here tonight?” Simmons offers, looking uncertainly at May. “I can curl up with Skye, and you can sleep in my bed.”

“It’s fine; I’ll stay with Coulson,” May says, carefully scooting away from Skye and moving to stand up. The girl mumbles something unintelligible and curls into a tighter ball, filling the empty space left from her laptop with her knees.

“May?” Simmons says, quietly, but with a weight behind it. May looks over at her and sees Simmons giving her the same stare she once saw her give Coulson when demanding that he let medical staff on their plane to take care of Skye.

“Stay,” the scientist repeats, still quietly.

May holds her gaze and nods once, then goes to fetch her bag from the other room.

Simmons has managed to get the covers out from under Skye and over her body by the time May comes back in. She triple-checks the locks before tucking her bag against the wall and changing clothes while Simmons washes her face in the sink. May doesn’t say anything as she switches places with Simmons in the bathroom and brushes her teeth, but as she comes out and pulls back the covers of the other bed, Simmons speaks softly from behind her.
“Are you staying?” she asks, and May faces her as she climbs into bed. Simmons is sitting up with her legs folded against her chest, her arms wrapped around her calves. Between them, Skye is still curled up, dead to the world, one hand tucked up over her face like a cat’s paw.

“I don’t know if you think it doesn’t make a difference,” Simmons goes on quietly, glancing down at Skye, “but if you need to hear someone say it, it does. You aren’t just needed. You’re wanted. And I don’t want to see her hurt again.”

She meets May’s eyes as she reaches towards her and turns off the light, plunging the room into bewildered, disorienting darkness. May doesn’t ask for an explanation, just lays her head on the pillow and listens to the two girls’ quiet breathing, focusing on it until she falls asleep.

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She opens her eyes at one point to see the ceiling of the cockpit, and she sits up quickly, panic immediately driving her weariness to the periphery. The cockpit door is closed, and the light filtering through the windscreen is dim, but she can’t hear any of the plane’s noises, meaning it must be grounded somewhere…

*But is it our plane? Or is it still in the hands of Hydra?*

She shifts onto her knees and peeks over the back of the pilot’s chair.

The scene outside the plane looks like a base of some sort—everyone milling around in this hangar seems to belong there—techs, mechanics, drivers—and even if they’re not in SHIELD apparel, she doesn’t see any Hydra logos either.

*So far so good…*

She glances up at the control panel and sees a couple of hair elastics hanging from one of the less-used switches above the pilot’s seat.

*Anyone besides me would have knocked those out of the way by now…*

Moving low to the ground so that she stays behind the cover of the seats, she shifts over to the cabinet where she has kept her encrypted line and reaches up to open it quietly.

Her line is gone, but her extra clothes are still there.

*Thank god.*

She dresses quickly. She has no idea where or when she is or what kind of response to expect from anyone who sees her, so she checks her usual place to stow a firearm—just in case—and takes it with her, making sure the cartridges are all ICER rounds.

Outside the cockpit, the plane is nearly silent, but she slips around the corner of the kitchenette with her gun held in rigid arms. The cabin is similar to the last time she saw their Bus—the windows surrounding the holocom are still blown out, but now they’re at least covered in tarp, making repairs appear imminent. More importantly, she can see a girl with a dark ponytail seated up on the table with a laptop on her knees…and she’s talking to another Melinda.

*Okay. If this is a time and place where you and Skye are both on the plane and not shooting at anyone, you’re probably fine…Definitely the future, though…*

May lowers her gun to rest at her side, taking a few silent steps across the carpeted cabin floor.
"Maybe you can just go wait this out in your bunk…if it's still the same one…"

Thankfully, the door is standing open, and May sees her duffel (the same one that should be sitting on the floor of her motel room right now) open on the floor, her own clothes visible on top of it. As she slips across the threshold, however, she glances back towards the holocom to see if either of the women saw her.

But neither of them is looking. Skye is still seated on the table but has set the laptop aside, and her voice has risen a little.

“I get why Coulson kept what Simmons is doing from us—I understand he’s protecting her, making sure no one compromises her mission, but you knew?”

There’s a brief pause before her older self answers, her tone gentle but unapologetic.

“I knew.”

May feels her own brows grow up.

Simmons is on the field?

May carefully sets her ICER on the desk of the bunk and shifts closer to the holocom on careful, silent steps. Neither of them seem to hear her as Skye goes on, swinging one leg anxiously.

“I’m scared for her. Simmons in Hydra? She is a terrible liar.”

What.

We would never—

She’s close enough now that she can see her older self almost smirking in agreement with Skye’s sentiment and that Skye has cut bangs into her hair.

“I’m serious!” Skye is saying. “I love her, but her trying to lie, it is a horror show.”

“Maybe before, but not anymore,” her older self says, putting a comfortable hand on Skye’s nearest knee. “She can handle it. She’s good.”

The woman shifts closer then, stepping between Skye’s knees and settling her arms on the girl’s thighs, her hands landing on Skye’s hips, far lower than May expected.

Wait, what…

“She’s not the only one,” her older self says, her voice lower now.

Skye stares solemnly at the other Melinda for a moment, then puts her hands on the other woman’s shoulders and leans down until their foreheads touch. For a long moment, they just hold each other in understanding silence in an embrace far too intimate to be innocent.

And then May tips her face up and kisses her.

Neither of the women seems surprised by this. One of Skye’s hands moves up to cradle her face, smoothing over her cheek and tilting her head carefully to deepen the kiss. May’s hands are still resting on her hips, but then they drag gently up the girl’s sides, down her back as the kiss goes on. It’s a kiss that radiates familiarity, trust, and affection, one with the practice of other kisses wrapped up inside it.
May doesn’t remember deciding to move, but she’s stumbling back, a few clumsy steps moving her out of sight, and she nearly trips over a drop-cloth as she turns and scurries back towards the front of the plane...

When time abruptly tips her back onto the grubby motel-room carpet, she’s very conscious of the breathing of the two other people in the room. She dresses in the bathroom and then slips out with record-setting silence, her mind still racing hours later, even after working methodically through her tai chi until the rest of the world wakes up.
Ok. It got split. That means that there will be one more chapter to wrap up season 1. A 12-hour time difference’s jet lag was involved in this week, so apologies if you see more errors than usual. Hopefully, however, you see some other things that make you happy.

January 8, 2014: Skye is 24, May is 44

She’s a little confused when she wakes up the next morning.

Her eyes blink open into the slant of pale light drifting through the sheer curtains and an empty bed across from her. She rubs her eyes and rolls over, away from the light, but nearly collides with Jemma, who is stretched out on the other half of the mattress.

“Leave off,” Jemma mumbles, barely getting her eyes open as Skye rocks up on one elbow, looking confusedly at her.

“Your bed too cold?” Skye murmurs, and Jemma’s brow furrows.

“Uhm,” she murmurs, sitting up and looking around the room. “May was…”

Understanding, Skye sits up quickly, spotting May’s duffle in the corner of the room. Something warm automatically blooms in her chest, but it deflates quickly when she glances around and sees no trace of the woman.

Was. Didn’t stay.

Maybe she just got up early for a workout—doesn’t necessarily mean she bailed…

Fitz knocks on their adjoining door a little after they’re both dressed. He has two mugs in his hands and a grim look on his face.

“You’d better turn on the news,” he says as he offers Jemma a cup of tea and Skye a cup of coffee. Piqued, the three of them pile onto their bed as Skye grabs the remote.

The lead story of the eight o’clock broadcast is about the assassination of a top drug lord in Colombia, which was apparently carried out by a man with mechanical enhancements on his body. Grainy security footage shows without a doubt that it’s the man Skye last saw shooting at her out of the back of their plane.

“If they really are in Colombia,” Skye says, pulling up her satellite hacks from the day before on her laptop, “then Garrett and our hijacked plane might not be in American airspace. We have to expand our search.”

Not long after that, Coulson calls them into his room, and Skye finally sees May. She looks very focused on scribing out Coulson’s explanation on a big notepad and doesn’t pay any attention as the three of them file in and sit on the beds for the presentation.
With all their research the day before, Coulson shows them the connections that they’ve been overlooking—it all comes back to Cybertek.

“Cybertek built Deathlok, shipped items to Quinn, who was working for the Clairvoyant, who turned out to be Garrett, who planted Ward on our Bus, because he wanted to know why I didn’t stay dead.”

The GH-325 must be for the Centipede serum that Garrett’s been developing, which is why Ward was so set on getting the information off the hard-drive when he came back. Something stiffens in the room when they get to that part, and Skye realizes this is the first time she’s heard anyone say his name since they all got back together.

She can hear the word echo whenever they stop talking.

Coulson fills the others in on her Trojan horse program Skye has built, and she explains the need to find a Hydra computer to plug in the remaining parts. May takes over to talk about the Cybertek offices, and how those are probably the same thing.

“We have no authority to do this,” Coulson says after explaining the infiltration mission. “We’re no longer SHIELD agents. We’re...”

“Vigilantes,” Fitz says, actually smiling excitedly, and Coulson nods.

“So if you’re with me, I’m going to finish what we started. I’ll be damned if I let Ward and Garrett get away with murder. And I want my plane back.”

“We’re going to get the plane back,” May mutters, seemingly to herself. But she sounds a little too certain for Skye to think it’s only a pep talk.

Coulson gets an appointment with Cybertek R and D for that same afternoon just before Trip gets back with a case of actual Howling Commandos gear. Skye nearly falls over when she realizes that Trip’s grandfather is one of Captain America’s buddies that she had studied in all her SHIELD handbooks, and everyone seems some level of star-struck as they paw through the ancient technology.

“It would be safest,” Coulson says as they organize their gear, “if this infiltration was carried out by field agents rather than FitzSimmons, just in case things get hairy and they need to fight their way out. Skye, that means we need you to go ahead and set up comms for everyone. You’ll also be in the van. Fitz and Simmons, we’ll put each of you in May and I’s ears, and you can dictate exactly what we need to say in a sit-down with Cybertek staffers.”

“So you and May get to go in on this?” Trip says from the floor where he’s tuning up a grappling gun. “What am I? Chopped liver?”

Coulson smiles to himself as he cheerfully checks the laser-cigarettes. “No, but I think Fitz’s shirts will fit me better. And Simmons, if you wouldn’t mind making May look a little more the part...”

May:

The mission in Cybertek had some unexpected twists, but it was still one of the easiest missions she has ever been part of. She wasn’t expecting to find John Garrett’s file in the Deathlok cabinet or to have to dump that same large file cabinet out the window to take their intel with them, but she guesses there’s a first time for everything.
“Well done, you!” Simmons says with a grin as they all pile into the shipping van after the cabinet and book it back to their motel hideout. “You sounded like a true scientist.”

“And I didn’t even tear your slacks,” May responds with a smirk, pulling out her earpiece.

“Gotta say, though,” Skye says, grinning up at them as she paws through the files, “as entertaining as it was to hear May talk that much, all that science still sounds better in a British accent.”

“Everything sounds better in a British accent,” Simmons agrees with a smile that she seems to have caught from Skye.

“Y’all keep that cabinet braced between you all,” Trip calls from the driver’s seat of the car. “I don’t want any of you getting pancaked on the walls when I make a turn.”

“Nice sweater-button-down-tie combo, by the way, AC,” Skye says as May and Simmons lean back against one of the trucks walls and press their feet against the loose file cabinet while he and Skye presses back on the other side. “Don’t tell Fitz, but you make that look good…you should think about making those a staple under all your suits.”

Coulson and Simmons both laugh, and May watches Skye lighting up the dim space around them, managing to infect every one of them with a small measure of joy that is just enough to balance the scales of the vastness of the task before them, and says nothing.

Back at the motel, they all crowd around a patio table, passing around the papers that Coulson methodically extracts from Garrett’s file.

“He was Patient Zero…” Coulson says disbelievingly, turning over diagrams of the nineties-era hardware that is installed in Garrett’s body.

Skye sighs. “We’ve been looking at this all wrong. He doesn’t just want GH-325 for Hydra, he wants it for himself.”

They get side-tracked with a tangent about the eye-programmed super-soldiers, and Fitz takes the opportunity to slip the first defense of Ward that May has heard from any of them.

“Maybe Garrett did that to Ward too,” the boy mutters, looking down at his folded hands. “Maybe he’s being programmed.”

May feels her blood pressure rising involuntarily, but it’s Simmons who shuts Fitz down first.

“Fitz,” the young woman sighs. “When are you going to stop clinging to the idea that Ward’s the victim and not the perpetrator?”

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When I see something that tells me I shouldn’t with my own two eyes,” Fitz mutters defensively (insistently). “We don’t know all the facts.”

As much as May understands Fitz wanting to cling to his optimism, she knows it’s futile. Garrett surely must have played a large part in grooming Ward to think the way Garrett wanted him to, but there’s no such thing as mind control. What Ward did, he chose to do.

Beside her, Skye pulls in a breath, and May prepares herself to hear Skye take Fitz’s side, defending the man who she couldn’t bring herself to kill two days ago.

Instead, Skye’s response surprises her.
“You want a fact, Fitz?” Skye snaps, jumping to her feet and glaring down at him. “Ward murders people!” It’s the most emotion May has seen from her since the girl shoved her in the pool yesterday. “I should have let Mike finish him off when I had the chance,” she continues says, seemingly to herself but loud enough for the rest of them to hear. “I was stupid and weak...”

May’s heart squeezes painfully in her chest.

Skye...

“You weren’t weak,” Coulson says quickly, gazing firmly at Skye. “You had compassion. That’s harder.” The girl doesn’t look at him, but Coulson makes her a promise anyway. “We’ll find him.”

Skye strides off to her room without a backwards glance at the pizza delivery, and lunch is nearly silent without her. By the time the remaining slices are cold and hardening in the box, Skye still hasn’t resurfaced, so May picks up the remaining can of soda.

She’s been putting off talking to Skye all day, but she can’t let the girl spiral into the depths of regret that May herself knows all too well.

She doesn’t need to know what you saw last night. She might not know about that future any more than you did before last night. And it’s not the most important thing to worry about right now, anyway.

Skye accepts the soda without enthusiasm, looking glum as she plants her feet on the floor while May sits down on the other bed across from her.

“Look, Fitz can’t process the truth about Ward—not yet,” May says, trying to help Skye understand. “What he said about the mind-programming…it’s what he needs to believe.”

Skye stares at the floor for a moment before looking up at May. “Do you think Ward’s being controlled?” she asks.

May scrolls again through every lie and deception she has tallied of Ward’s time with their team. You don’t play that well unless you’re playing to win.

Her blood boils just a little bit under her skin, and she focuses on fortifying the barriers she put up against everything this morning.

“Absolutely not,” she says firmly.

The girl sighs. “Neither do I.”

Skye looks away for a moment, and when she looks back at May, her eyes seem darker.

“I’m so, so...mad,” she finally whispers. “I hate him for what he’s done. I hate myself for not seeing it. I hate myself for not letting him die...”

“Skye,” May says, firmly enough that Skye looks up at her. “We all missed it. Don’t punish yourself for that. But you did what he never would have done, and that makes you the better person. Whatever happens now, we’re going to face it as a team. You did the right thing, and I don’t want you to regret that.”

It’s okay to feel it, as long as you learn how to use it to get you through it.

“It’s okay to be furious,” she says, resting her elbows on her knees and leaning closer to Skye. “You
trusted him, and he took advantage of that. You loved him and he—"

“No,” Skye interrupts, glancing sharply up at her. “I don’t know how serious you’re being right now, but don’t even joke about that. I cared about him, but I didn’t love him.”

May’s brow furrows, and she presses right back.

“You saved him by giving up intel you knew was important,” she reminds Skye. “That shows me that you felt something stronger than duty to your organization—"

That’s the only thing that could have made you do that, isn’t it?

But the look Skye is giving her is one of incredulous exasperation.

“You really still don’t get it, do you?” Skye says quietly, gazing steadily at May. “If you think I’m upset because he betrayed us, you’re damn right. But do you really think I’m upset because I’m in love with him? It wasn’t love, May—I was still being selfish. I didn’t want to live with his death on me. But now Garrett has intel that he can kill other people with…”

“Don’t do that to yourself,” May says in a warning tone, shaking her head. “Don’t start down that road—it won’t lead anywhere good.”

Skye closes her eyes and shakes her head slowly, swallowing once before she opens her eyes again.

“How do you live with it?” the girl asks in a whisper, a question that May knows Skye finally understands for the first time since she started training to become an agent. “How do agents like you and Coulson and Ward take lives and go home to themselves at the end of the day?”

May shrugs. “It’s part of the job—a part you have to learn how to deal with in a way you can sustain. Some people pretend like they can shake it off, but in reality, everyone just learns how to carry it.”

“I take it that means you aren’t actually as uninvested in Ward’s betrayal as you seem?”

May shakes her head again, letting a calculating smile spread across her face. “Oh, I’m furious,” she assures Skye. “I’m just saving it all for when I see him again.”

“I’ll make sure and stay out of your way,” Skye says with a smile that seems the tiniest bit lighter than before.

“And, if you want to learn my…coping methods…” May goes on hesitantly, “I’m up most mornings at five.”

Skye’s face lights up. “Are you offering to train me?” she asks with more excitement than May anticipated, so much that May’s own answer sounds clumsy in response.

“Just if you…want to…” she says slowly, and she’s even more surprised when Skye leaps across the space between them and grabs her into a hug.

“God, May, of course I do,” Skye is saying breathlessly over her shoulder, and May can’t even get her own arms up in response. “Of course I want to train with you. I don’t think you even know…”

But May remains stiff within the embrace, past, present, and future piling up until she feels like can’t even move on until they’re all organized again.

What exactly don’t I know?
“Skye,” she says slowly, bringing her hands up to tug Skye gently back until she can see her face. “When I visited you when you were growing up, what did I tell you about the kind of relationship we would have in the future?”

Skye’s expression immediately changes, her smile disappearing completely, and she sits back down on the other bed, her knees bumping awkwardly against May’s.

“Uh,” Skye begins in a tone that tells May she is picking her words very carefully. “You said we would be part of a family together. That we would live in one place with those people, and I wouldn’t ever have to leave you. You liked to fall back on the ‘star and comet’ metaphor a lot—that you couldn’t stop leaving, but that you would always come back to me.”

There’s obviously something else that she’s stepping carefully around, something that she’s very intentionally not saying. “Anything else?” May asks slowly, staring steadily at the girl.

Skye stares right back, seeming a little at war with herself, and May feels like she can see the nine and twelve and fourteen and seventeen and nineteen and twenty-year-old all at once, wrapped inside the girl in front of her like Russian dolls—separate images, but all the same individual. Someone who still (always) knows more about her future than she does.

“Skye,” May says after a long silence. “What are you not telling me?”

The girl across from her looks like a child attempting to tell a truth she’s certain is about to lead to a punishment. “You told me on the last visit…” Skye begins, but she trails off, looking stricken. “May, you told me that I needed to let you figure it out on your own.”

“Skye,” May repeats, a bit more sharply than she meant to. “What have I not figured out yet?”

Skye looks down for a moment, then takes a deep breath. When she finally looks up, she seems resolved.

“I know that you’ve been to the visits in Austin by now,” the girl says, glancing tellingly down at May’s hands, which are folded on her legs, as though remembering the wounds across her skin. “You know what happened on New Year’s Eve, then. That was as obvious as I got about how I felt about you at that age, how I’d felt for a few years at that point. And I guess you remember the way you reacted when I kissed you…” May looks away, saying nothing.

“When you showed up in my apartment the next time,” Skye goes on, “you didn’t seem to remember that it had even happened, even though I knew you’d been to Austin before, which made me think that I must have had it all wrong—that I’d gotten the wrong impression in the past and arrived at the wrong conclusion about…our future together. But the visit after that—which was the last visit before I met the present-day you—it was obviously a later version of you, and you told me the truth that you’d been dancing around for years. That you loved me in all the ways I hoped you would. All the ways I loved you, you loved me the same.”

May sits very, very still, staring away at a fixed point of the emptiness between them. The words are still floating on the surface of her mind, but she tugs them deeper, willing them to soak in until she can understand enough to respond. Her mind is still trying to process all the possibilities of the future, reconciling everything Skye has just told her with what she saw in her future travel last night…But as she immediately scrambles for the past, trying to prove such a future impossible, she’s hearing between the lines, all the words and empty spaces that she had chosen not to listen to before…

Almost seems like knowing her…loving her…will be the thing that makes all the difference, doesn’t it?
You’re just wasting your time.

...seeing you—it was always good news

I can keep my mouth shut and I can try to stay away, but I can’t stop hurting when you push me back.

I can’t stop wanting you to care about me the way I care about you.

...some days it feels like I couldn’t get away from all this even if I wanted to, that you’re the one holding on to me and always pulling me back in...

I hate that you can push me away, or leave me, or make me leave but it doesn’t make a bit difference because I still want you to love me all the same...

And you, Meimei—stop wasting time.

What if it’s just not like that yet?

I hope you’re not mad...

So much better. As soon as you stop wasting time.

You think I’m upset because I was in love with him?

“May, please say something,” she hears Skye saying, and she pulls herself up out of the past and into the present. She looks back at the girl and sees that Skye is staring at her, still looking nervous, afraid of an unpredictable reaction, but May can’t think of a word to say.

All she feels is relieved.

Behind her, a sharp rap on the door prefaces Coulson opening it, looking breathless. “Trip ID’d a number of Cybertek shipments that ping-ponged across the globe,” he says quickly, a note of urgency in his voice. “Brazil, Cambodia, Syria—but they all ended up in Havana.”

“SHIELD used to have a base there,” May says quickly, amazed that her voice is steady despite her heart hammering in her chest.

“Told you we’d find him,” Coulson says, raising a brow in Skye’s direction. “We’re going to Cuba.”

Skye:

It’s easy to distract herself from the momentous conversation by focusing instead on the task at hand once they know where they need to go. They all work double-time to pack up everything from the motel and get it loaded into their stolen cars. May and Trip drive them all on separate routes to get back to the private airfield where the quinjet is hidden, and they’re airborne before they’ve even got all the gear stowed.

Skye’s mind is still racing at double-time once they’re all finally buckled into their seats in the back of the plane. Once they reach a cruising altitude, Trip comes back to work on a plan with Coulson using all the satellite scans Skye can gather. Once her part is done, however, she slips away towards the cockpit.

May came to her this morning. This time, she needs to be the one who knocks.
“Mind if I keep you company?” she says when she opens the door.

It’s not really a great opener, but it worked out fine the last time. And just like last time, May doesn’t say anything at all in reply, which Skye chooses to take as a good sign.

“Cool.”

She climbs carefully into the co-pilot’s seat and buckles in. The quinjet is much smaller than their Bus, but the cockpit seems equally complex. May’s hands are as steady as ever as she keeps the plane on a steady course, soaring over the cloudcover southeast across Mexico and Texas towards the Gulf. Night had fallen before they had gotten the plane in the air, but she knows that now that they’re flying east, dawn will be coming sooner than usual. Clouds obscure the land beneath them, and she’s not sure if they’re currently sailing over land or sea, whether there is a solid place for them to come down.

“I know that that was a lot…” Skye finally says, glancing over at May. “A lot to hear at once, a lot to try to process. But I don’t want to just leave it where we ended this morning.”

“This is a terrible time for all of this,” May mutters with a shake of her head, staring straight ahead.

Skye smirks to herself and uses a phrase she heard someone else say a few days ago. “It’s never going to be a good time.”

A long silence follows, but Skye waits patiently. She’s done enough talking for one day—she needs to hear some kind of response from May.

Finally, the woman sighs.

“You’ve been keeping this from me the whole time…for months…” May mutters, shaking her head slowly.

“You’re not exactly someone who can criticize for keeping secrets,” Skye responds, surprisingly annoyed by May’s choice of an opening volley.

But May is still shaking her head, continuing to stare straight ahead. “I’m not mad, Skye. I’m impressed.” And she does actually sound it.

Skye smiles hesitantly, remembering how surprised she had been when the Future May (in her past) had told her that this was the part of the truth that Skye should not deliver to May when they finally met one day.

“Oh the last visit,” she says, her chest feeling lighter than it ever has as she finally turns over the last of her secrets, “that version of you said that I needed to give you a chance to figure things out on your own. You had let everything happen in its own time for me. Now, it was my turn to let it happen to you.”

“But…why did it happen for you?” May says then. “You were a kid. I was an adult. How could you feel…like that?”

Skye smiles. “May, you were the only constant good thing in my life. Of course I loved you. And when I was older…is it really so surprising that I eventually fell in love with you?”

She might be imagining it, but it seems like something in May’s eyes is softer when she glances over at her again.
“Did I…did I deny it?” she asks, looking concerned. “Besides the time at New Years? The last time we kissed?”

For the first time since they started this conversation, Skye feels a blush creep across her cheeks.

“Um, if we’re being totally honest now,” she says slowly, glancing away, “then I should probably tell you that New Year’s might have been the last time you kissed me, but it wasn’t the last time I kissed you.”

May goes quiet for a long moment, and Skye bites her lip, waiting.

Well, you were going to have to tell her sooner or later…

“Did you see a future version of me on the day Simmons threw herself out of the plane?” May finally asks, and Skye thinks of the version of May who snuck into her bunk to say hello.

Oh yeah, that happened too…

“…Yeah,” she says slowly, feeling herself blushing deeper. “I did kiss you then, too,” Skye says slowly, her heartbeat picking up further. And that version of May was here from this fall. That’s not far off… “That actually wasn’t the time I was thinking about, though,” Skye admits, throwing herself out on the proverbial limb.

Those words seem to startle May. “Wait, what?” she says quickly, looking fully over at Skye for the first time, alarmed.

Skye forces herself to not look away. “Uh…when I saw you in 2011, the very last visit before we met in real time…”

Fuck, how do you even tell someone this…

May is still staring at her expectantly. “We kissed?” she demands in a low voice.

Skye is barely breathing. “May, we did everything.”

She watches this fact slap May across the face, watches the slight widening of her eyes, the way her whole expression seems to just go offline, the way she faces front again as soon as she seems to remember to conceal…

She knows that the long silence that follows is justified. She still takes it as a good sign that May doesn’t ask her to leave. The miles of clouds roll beneath them, and Skye thinks of the visit in question, the memory that she has clung to for years like the precious remnant of the past that it is. That night had been…so many things. But the way it had ended had been, at its core, a relief.

May loved her like that. After all the years of wondering, confusion, and suspense, it was finally confirmed. It was wonderful and intimate and so, so good…but at the bottom, it was all just a release.

How much longer do we still have to wait for that to be present-day for both of us, though? Skye thinks to herself for the thousandth time. How much ground does she still need to make up before she feels the same way?

When the questions crowd out the comfort, Skye finally lets herself talk.

“May, I know this is a lot, but can you please tell me what you’re thinking?” she says, glancing over at the pilot.
How appalling is this for you?

May doesn’t look at her as she responds, but her voice sounds more relaxed than Skye was expecting. “I’m trying to figure out why I would do something that horrible.”

“How horrible?” Skye repeats, taken aback. “What’s that supposed to mean?” She lets her tone get her offense across.

May shakes her head, still staring at the sky ahead of their plane as she goes on. “Skye, you and I have literally never been in a state where one of us doesn’t know more than the other. Me in your past, you in my present—one of us has always been holding all the cards about the future. I’m trying to fit my head around what you know—have known—all this time and what that’s probably meant in all the time we’ve spent together since I’ve met you. I say horrible because if we—if you—had that…experience, and then I left you for two years, you probably thought that once we met, things between us were going to be…something good. But I was terrible to you in the beginning.”

Skye’s face melts into a relieved smile. “Yeah, you kind of were,” she digs gently.

Beside her, May shrugs. “But a future version of me would have remembered that. So why would I still leave you with that expectation of the kind of relationship we were going to have when it was apparently not going to happen right away?”

Right away?

Skye’s smile grows. “I think that was exactly it, May. I think you wanted to make sure that I knew that it would happen. No matter how rough the beginning was, how long it took, we were headed that direction, that it was inevitable. It wasn’t a horrible thing. Not for me, anyway.”

May still says nothing, and Skye lets a few more miles pass. They must be getting close to Cuba by now, meaning that Trip will need to come back in for their descent. Skye takes a deep breath and lays the rest of her cards on the table.

All in.

“May…I love you,” she says quietly, trying to put all the sincerity she can into her voice. “I loved you one way when I was little, but besides that, I’ve been in love with you for years. And I understand why that would be scary for you. You’ve loved someone before, and you’ve seen it fall apart. You’ve felt different, deeper cuts than me, and I understand why you wouldn’t sign up for any new ones. But…I’m crazy about you, May. I’ve tried to talk myself out of it so many times, but it’s hopeless. You can call me the star for your comet, but you’ve been the same thing for me. I couldn’t get over you even if I tried, and I promise you that I have tried. Since I found you, I’ve been trying to let everything between us happen in its own time, but it doesn’t mean I haven’t been waiting for the future with an embarrassing desperation for years. So whether or not you’re ready to love me back…I just want you to know that I’m good at waiting. And in the meantime, I don’t think what I feel is going to change.”

Her heart is pounding by the end, but Skye feels lighter than she’s felt in years. Because finally, it’s all out there.

This is the end of all the secrets.

In the following silence, May finally looks over at her, and Skye meets her eyes. May’s face is carefully blank, but her tone is gentle when she finally speaks.

“You’re right,” she says softly. “This is a lot.”
Skye nods, resigned. “I know. And you told me yourself—you and I have the worst timing.”

A smile ghosts across May’s face. “One thing at a time?” she says, the slightest inflection making it an offering.

Skye nods, unbuckling her seatbelt. “I’ll go get Trip. We’ve got some traitors to bag.”

The sun is just starting to come up.

**January 9, 2013**

**May:**

They have work to do, and she can’t think about this right now. Ward, Garrett, and their plane are probably somewhere on this island, and May would love to tie everything up before the sun goes down today.

They split up once they’ve got the quinjet stowed off a private airfield in Havana. Trip hot-wires a 1970s-era van and drives her, Skye, and Coulson to the suspected Hydra base while Simmons and Fitz go searching the surrounding airfields for the Bus. The coordinates take them to a nondescript barbershop, and Trip goes in to investigate while Skye scans on her laptop for the presence of electronics inside.

In the tense silence while the three of them wait, May is very aware of everything that they’re not talking about.

Trip comes out of the barbershop shaking his head.

“If they were here, they’re long gone,” he says, climbing back into the van right as Coulson gets a call from Simmons saying they found the plane three hours from their location, and Skye convinces him to first let them to go in and plug in the Trojan horse to any remaining computer system. Right after they open the secret door in the basement and see the massive computer, the lights go down.

May turns and sees a glowing Berserker staff in the hands of a soldier and a half dozen red eyes winking on in front of them.

“Go, Skye!” Coulson shouts, and they let the bullets fly. A few fall, but May drops her gun to engage the soldier nearest to her, who swings the staff tauntingly.

“Well, if it isn’t the Cavalry,” he sneers, so irrationally confident that she manages to take him down with a single strike, catching the staff without thinking before it hits the ground. It’s just like before—a lightning strike of noise and power bursting beneath her skin, her worst memory crashing on her and filling her with all the emotions that she doesn’t need to hide from right in this moment, not if they’ll help her protect her team.

“Don’t ever call me that,” she snarls.

One swing of the staff rends a brick column to rubble, and as he looks at Coulson, startled, he just nods.

“Bring the house down,” he orders.

She does.

The ceiling is cracking and Trip, Skye, and Coulson are racing up the stairs ahead of her as she slams
one more soldier into another on her way out the door. The last thing she does is turn and hurl the staff into the collapsing cellar, hoping that this time, it stays buried. She can feel the ground trembling as she sprints up the stairs, can see fireworks bursting behind her eyes, a pistol pointed at a brown-eyed girl's heart...

They're at ground level and she's caught up to the others and pushing them out of the barber's shop ahead of her into blinding daylight as they race towards their van—it's a Cuban paseo, a Middle Eastern market...herself and Coulson in another van six years ago...

They're scrambling into the van when she feels the world tip like a table.

_Not now—not now—we have to go get Fitz and Simmons..._

Coulson is looking back at her, reaching to haul her in, and she grips his hand and lets him.

“Go get the kids!” she gasps as she tumbles onto the seat beside him. “I'll come back to her.”

She's reaching towards Skye as she disappears.

_June 1, 2008: Melinda is 38 and 44_

When the world steadies, she's standing on scalding concrete, and it only takes one breath of dry air for her to know where she is. This time, she's in an alley, and there's a laundry line suspended above her with clothes ripe for taking.

_Thank god._

She snatches a long-sleeved black dress off the line and hastily pulls it on, then grabs at the scarf hanging beside it, something she can use to cover her hair. But as she pulls the marigold garment off the line, a memory crackles as it surfaces.

_This scarf._

_This dress._

_This is the day you are there._

Her body immediately tenses. She wants to scream in protest and throw herself to the ground and hide here until this is all over. But she knows that today, she can't. She won't.

She breathes slowly. She reaches deep.

_You can do this. You already did this._

_Just breathe._

She has never run towards the action before, but she knows where to go—by now, she knows this drama well. She approaches on the opposite side of the building and goes in another way, one she had overlooked the first time around. On the ground floor, she subdues two men and locks them in a closet. She hears an agent one floor up trading blows with more men.

She slips through the back and into the lower room for the main event, knowing that somewhere in here, a younger copy of herself is already hiding. Through a stack of pallets, she watches the players crash into the room. A Russian woman with blonde hair sends the agent flying across the room with one punch.
Melinda’s heart is racing, but she can’t help yet.

_Breathe._

The agent fells two of the woman’s men, but the third one has a gun, and a bullet rips into her leg. She screams but takes the man down before she falls to the ground.

Melinda’s stomach turns over, remembering with horrible clarity what this moment—that bullet—had been that day: the blaring alarm. The silent canary.

The warning that she was out of time.

The mother dies from the stab wound in her stomach, but three more henchmen appear as Agent May levers herself off the ground.

“She’s dead! Snap out of it!” her younger self shouts.

“I like the pain,” a tiny voice says.

Melinda’s heart thunders in her chest, but she holds herself still.

_Breathe._

The girl steps out of her hiding place. She waves her hands and grown men fall dead. Agent May leaves a trail of blood across the dusty floor as she crawls backward, away from the child that looks too similar to another brown-eyed girl she’s visited.

“Just put your hand down,” Agent May begs, dragging herself through the dust, closer to Melinda.

“Give me your pain,” Katya repeats, a psychotic smile plastered over her chilling mantra.

Mindless SHIELD agents appear from another room. May’s hand touches the pistol.

_Breathe._

“Everything’s gonna be alright.”

Melinda takes a deep, silent breath and wraps her scarf around the lower part of her face.

One bullet.

Katya falls dead.

Agent May disappears.

_Thirteen._

Melinda vaults over the pallets and launches herself at the delirious SHIELD assault team, taking advantage of their confusion and shoving the crowd back into the adjoining room.

_Twelve._

_Eleven._

She slams the door and shoves a chair beneath the knob

_Ten._
She dashes through the bodies to the pile of clothes left on the floor. She does not look at the dead girl.

*Nine.*

She snatches up her shirt and begins unbuttoning it. Her hands do not shake.

*Eight*

*Seven.*

*Six.*

*Five.*

She undoes the fastenings of the slacks. A bloody bullet falls out of one pantleg.

*Four.*

*Three.*

Outside the building, a battering ram begins beating on the door.

*Two.*

She takes a step backward and pulls the scarf off.

*One.*

Agent May reappears on the ground, naked, gasping, and trembling. Melinda drops to her knees beside her. As soon as she touches her, Agent May starts flailing, crying out in nonsensical syllables. Melinda dodges her swings and catches her wrists in a firm hold.

"Melinda," she says, yanking the woman upright. “Mei Qiaolian!” Her voice does not tremble.

Her other self goes rigid immediately.

Melinda releases one wrist, pushes the woman’s hair back, and stares into her own eyes. She watches the worst moment of her life happen again, watches the realization run from her mind to her heart.

*This is it.*

“This is it,” her own voice croaks out of the woman in front of her.

She nods back nods soberly. "This is how it happens."

They say nothing else to each other as she helps the wounded woman quickly redress, a dark-eyed nine-year-old watching them with sightless eyes, the child’s hand outstretched and her face twisted in a cruel last laugh.
**Finale, I**

Chapter Notes

All right, friends, I’m going to put all these notes up here so that you actually read them before you’re drowning in feels…

This chapter was never intended to be the end of the story (*looks at word count* bangs head on desk*). I started this story back in the spring with the intention of this AU carrying through all three seasons, which is something I still want to do because it’s a story I still want to tell. We’ve gone through nearly 200,000 words to get here though, and I need a break, so here’s the plan:

I’m going on hiatus for a little while, probably a month or two, and then plan to pick up with the rest of the story (if you’re afraid you’ve got another 200,000 words coming your way, I’d say that we’re probably two-thirds of the way through the story already). You’ve seen how I try to keep canon events in the story, so speculate away about how this AU is going to work through those things. It would be nice to say that this chapter is the happy ending, but we both know that these girls still have a lot of turmoil ahead.

In the mean time, I’ll still be on tumblr [loved-the-stars-too-fondly], and always up for gabbing about AoS (what even is season 4) or fic or whatever, so feel free to message me, even if we’ve never talked before.

I also wanted to give you guys this link to an 8tracks playlist I’ve been putting together throughout the past few months. There’s hints about what’s coming next in there if you want a treasure hunt for the hiatus.

Again, I can’t thank all of you enough for sticking with this story through this long, exhausting, angsty year. Your comments and kudos have been so encouraging, and I hope you feel like this chapter has been worth the wait.

This is probably where I should tell you that the end of this chapter would probably be rated M…

And now that I have your full attention, let’s get to the story.

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**January 9, 2014: Skye is 24, May is 44**

“We can’t get on the plane without her.”

She says it quietly, but she knows Coulson heard her over the rumble of the van on the unpaved road. Trip is driving, they’re coming up on the hangar where the quinjet is hidden, and May is still not back.

Trip had been given the barest of explanations on the drive back to the hangar where their quinjet is waiting (“I know this sounds crazy, but I promise you, it’s legit”). He hadn’t actually seen May disappear, but they weren’t even a mile down the street before he noticed that she wasn’t in the car. Coulson had convinced him to keep driving and be ready to get in the pilot’s seat when they got to the jet, but he seemed no more relaxed than Skye over May’s disappearance.
“Skye,” Coulson responds in a low voice. “You heard what she said. We need to get to Fitz and Simmons. She’s reappeared on a moving plane before,” he reminds her, glancing over. “She should do it again as long as you’re on it.”

Skye wants to believe this, but everything about it feels counterintuitive.

*What if that’s not what happens? What if May doesn’t come back to where we are? She’ll be stranded somewhere in Cuba with no clothes, no weapons, no identification, no way of contacting us…*

Trip steers the van up to the hangar and hits the brakes as Coulson climbs out of the backseat to open the sliding doors. The darkness inside is disorienting as they roll in, and Skye hesitates in the car even after Trip kills the engine and climbs quickly out and hurries into the jet.

“Skye!” Coulson calls as he follows Trip up the quinjet’s ramp. “Let’s go! We need to catch up with Ward and Garrett.”

*Move, Skye. She wouldn’t want you to let them get away…*

She gabs her laptop bag and climbs out of the van. The aircraft is already making its start-up sounds as she mounts the ramp, and Coulson is standing at the top with a tablet, probably searching for Fitz and Simmons’ tracker, but Skye can’t help but protest one more time as she stands at the bottom of the ramp.

“Are you sure we can’t even—“

Even over the sounds of the plane, she hears the burst of air just behind her right before the crash of May’s body against the running board of the car. Skye spins around in time to see the woman scrabbling at the seats around her, stabilizing herself in her new surroundings, and Skye’s heart shudders in relief and she rushes forward, dropping her backpack and immediately pulling her jacket out of it, climbing into the car and wrapping it around May’s shoulders.

“Oh, thank God, May, are you—“

Skye falls silent as May raises her head and she sees the look on her face. It’s an echo of the way she looked that night seven years ago when she had appeared with Skye in a library bathroom. Shaken. Fearful. Barely holding it together.

Skye doesn’t hesitate; she just crowds onto the floor and pulls May into her arms.

May is actually trembling within her embrace, but Skye feels the woman’s head settle willingly onto her shoulder, her arms coming hesitantly up to clutch at Skye’s arm, almost returning the embrace.

She hears Coulson tramping down the ramp, and though May doesn’t move, Skye looks over her shoulder, begging him with her eyes to give them a minute. He’s holding May’s pile of clothes, though.

*I forgot…*

He sets them on the seat beside Skye, an understanding look in his eyes.

“Wheels up in five,” he says quietly before backing away.

Against her shoulder, May pulls in a shuddering breath and raises her head, pulling Skye’s jacket tighter around herself. Skye glimpses tear tracks on her cheeks just before May smears them away,
avoiding Skye’s eyes.

What happened? What did she see?

“Where did—“ But Skye cuts herself off.

If you know it hurts, you don’t make her talk about it.

Instead, she just reaches for May’s clothes, picking up the pile and setting the stack on May’s thighs, and May covers her hand with her own.

“Bahrain,” the woman whispers then, and Skye feels her heart break, understanding.

Oh, May…

“I’m sorry,” Skye whispers, not looking away.

May finally raises her head, and Skye can nearly see the woman actively pulling herself together, the shattered look in her eyes slowly fading to the back, smoothed over with self-control. May’s expression softens, but Skye is still startled when May actually brings Skye’s hand up to press against her cheek, her own hand covering Skye’s completely, as if afraid Skye is going to pull away. A memory drifts to the surface, and Skye pictures the last time she and May sat in a van together, the day they had finally met in real time. Back then, May had nearly leapt away when Skye had reached out to touch her. Now, she’s not sure who’s holding on to who.

They sit in silence, holding onto one another until the quinjet starts a careful pivot in order to slide out of the small hangar, which reminds them both that May still isn’t dressed. May quickly drops Skye’s hand and pulls herself up onto one of the van’s seats, and Skye climbs out of the van with her bag, waiting until May emerges fully dressed, and they quickly hurry up the ramp together. She brushes May’s hand once as they walk, but May has her gaze fixed straight ahead, and Skye looks up to see Coulson hitting the button to close the ramp behind them, tablet in hands and a grim look on his face.

“FitzSimmons got a tracker on the Bus. It crossed the ocean. And they’re not responding.”

May:

They spend the entire flight making a plan.

Coulson had given her a questioning look when they were finally face-to-face again, but she had just shaken her head—not now. She had separated herself from everyone during take-off and worked through her breathing exercises in relative solitude, and it does feel like she’s managed to shelve everything from the morning, contain it inside her usual “coping methods” until she has a chance to use the hotter side of it (hopefully before too long).

Skye has displayed everyone’s emotions on their behalf, her brow pinched with worry as she hunted through Hydra’s databases for any installations in New Mexico. The Cybertek manufacturing facility outside of Santa Fe seems to be their best bet, and when the tracker shows Bus landing just a few miles away from it, they know they’ve found their target.

“We only get one shot at this,” Coulson says as they near their destination, slowly descending. “Trip
and I will crest the ridge, use a noisemaker to grab a three-wheel, maybe something with more fireworks, and then open a window for you two. You crawl in, grab the dealer, force his hand, he’ll get us our ace in the hole, and then Bob’s your uncle.”

“Roger that,” Skye says, loading her gun on the floor (perfectly, May notices).

“Makes it sound easy,” Trip teases, filling his bag with more of his grandfather’s Howling Commandos gear.

“You’re risking everything on the belief that Mike Petersen cares more about his son than about his own life.

Coulson’s face is grim as he loads his own weapon. “I know. And back-up isn’t coming. It will be just the four of us. We’ll be outmanned, and outgunned. But Fury always said that a man can accomplish anything when he realizes he’s a part of something bigger.”

May glances around at their ragtag splinter of SHIELD that’s supposed to get this all done: three seasoned agents and one newbie hacker who barely fills up her bulletproof vest. It doesn’t feel like something bigger.

She and Trip land the quinjet a mile away from the base, and Coulson pauses them all with one more order as they all wait for the ramp to lower.

“If any of you end up facing down Ward or Mike,” Coulson says as bright winter sun streams into the plane, “I want them both taken alive.”

May shoots him a surprised look inside her glare, and Trip looks even less happy.

“Sir, with all due respect—”

“I can’t imagine anything worth keeping Ward alive for—”

“Ward’s a murderer, Coulson—“ Skye adds, and Coulson acknowledges them all with a nod.

“I said take him alive,” he repeats as they tramp down the ramp together. “I didn’t say you had to hold back.”

Trip leads out, clearing the area around the plane, and Coulson squeezes Skye’s shoulder before she and May turn to go. “You know, our fist mission on the Bus was picking up you and tracking down Mike Petersen,” he says as Skye meets his eyes solemnly. “Let’s bring this full-circle and find that plane and give a boy his father back, all right?”

Skye nods, and, seeming to sense that Coulson has something to say to May too, moves away and catches up with Trip.

“You offered to train her?” Coulson asks, looking after Skye as she races into the sunlight.

May nods. “She’ll be a great agent no matter what, but wouldn’t you want her to train with the best?” She glances at Coulson with a teasing smirk, but he’s staring steadily at her, a knowing look in his eye.
“We’ve come a long way, haven’t we?” he says quietly, and she thinks back to those first weeks on their plane, the one she’s determined to get back today; the first time she and Skye received a mission briefing together, when she was seeing Skye for the first time and Skye was finally meeting her after a lifetime of memories; the first time (last time) she was in a van with Skye, terrified by the knowledge this girl had of a future that hadn’t happened yet…

They never could have predicted what happened over those next few months. She never could have predicted what Skye would become. To the team. To SHIELD. To her.

*You wasted so much time in the beginning trying to push her away.*

*You wasted so much time…*

*…time…*

*“Stop wasting time”…*

Oh.

…

Oh.

**Skye:**

The four of them split up a good distance from the facility, with Coulson and Trip sneaking over the north ridge while she and May take a wide circuit around to the south. May doesn’t say anything on the long walk except to occasionally check in over commas, and Skye is too nervous to think about much more than the immediate tasks ahead of them.


*And hopefully find Fitz and Simmons.*

They army-crawl up a ridge and take out the security guards with well-placed ICER-shots, giving them a chance to rush down and get in position near the perimeter wall, waiting for Trip and Coulson to hijack the firepower that will open a window for them.

Skye presses against the high concrete wall and counts the seconds, eyes scanning for any more approaching guards.

“Take a breath, Skye,” May says quietly, and Skye looks over to see May watching Skye’s hands. She looks down too and sees her gun is trembling in her grip.

“I’m not scared,” she says quickly, trying to steady her hands.

“Didn’t say you were,” May responds pedantically, glancing up at her. “Breathe anyway.”

Skye keeps her gaze on May and imitates the slow, deep breath she pulls in, exhaling even more slowly, repeating the cycle until her hands steady.

“Good,” May says quietly, nodding once, pressing back against the wall beside Skye. “Make that a habit at all times in the field—it’s one of the easiest things you can do to make your mission go better.”
“So we’re starting the training now, huh?” Skye asks, trying to lighten her own thoughts by reminding herself that this is something great and new and exciting.

“No reason to waste any time,” May says, looking away and scanning the area around them again.

Skye tilts her head back and looks up at the concrete wall stretching high above them. “Do you think Fitz and Simmons are in there?” she asks, unable to press down on the urgency of the unknown.

May lets out another slow breath beside her. “I hope not,” she mutters. “I hope they’re somewhere safe.”

“Well, if anyone could have snuck out of captivity without firing a gun, it’s the two of them,” Skye attempts, feeling the worry swelling up in her chest again.

May nudges her with her elbow. “Hey, stay focused,” her new S.O. orders, and Skye looks over at her. “What are you doing right now?” May asks, and Skye tries to smile confidently as she answers.

“Going into a no-good organization to free some prisoners and take down a psychopath.”

May nods encouragingly. “And what are you going to do to make that happen?”


Now, May smiles back. “That’s all you need to worry about right now. We’ll get FitzSimmons back once we fix the bigger problem.”

They fall silent again, and Skye feels another sickening thought creep into her mind.

Ward is probably in there. You’re going to have to see him again...talk to him again...

She shudders to think what lies he could possibly spew when he sees her this time.

And you told her own share of lies before you took your mask off, too...

“I kissed him, May,” she blurs out. She doesn’t know why, but it feels like something that needs to be said, in case this is her last chance to say it. She looks over at May and sees the woman staring at her, surprised, but she doesn’t say anything.

“Back at Providence, before I found out what he was,” Skye goes on, letting the stream of words out before she loses her nerve, “I was mad at you, and he was trying to be charming, and I was just trying to forget about everything you had just said to me, and now if we die today, I’m going to die with him being the last person I kissed...”

“Hey.” May elbows her again, cutting her off, and Skye sees that she’s taken one hand off her gun.

“First of all,” the woman says, wrapping one hand around the strap of Skye’s vest, “this is Kevlar, because you’re not taking one more bullet for this team if I have anything to say about it. Second...”

May suddenly leans in and kisses her.

It is so surprising that for a suspended moment, Skye can’t even react, because What and How and Oh my god—but finally her brain catches up and she turns fully into the woman beside her, letting go of her gun with one hand and wrapping her arm around May’s waist and pulling their bodies together. It’s everything Skye remembers and even better, urgent and unimpeded and very very mutual...
But then there’s an explosion on the other side of the wall that tells them that Coulson and Trip are either in the car or at least causing plenty of trouble, and Skye’s head is spinning for more than one reason when May pulls suddenly back. The woman’s face is flushed, her eyes bright, and her hand is still wrapped tightly around the strap of Skye’s vest.

“Third,” May says, sounding breathless but also more than a little smug, “we’re not going to die today.” And then she smiles. Really smiles. “We’re going to make it. We already did.”

Skye stares at her, feeling a disbelieving grin spreading across her own face even as May lets go of her and steps away, raising her gun as they hear the sound of a Humvee roaring their direction on the other side of the wall. Skye can’t even stop smiling when the vehicle blasts a hole in the wall and she and May take cover from the flying rubble...

Because she’s not going to die today—and that’s not all she now knows.

May:

Two fingers on her right hand are definitely broken somewhere, probably the same places she broke them back in ‘96. She can’t really twist her shoulders at all without the muscles over her ribs screaming in protest. And she can’t wait to see the size of the bruise that she has across the back of her thigh where the bastard got her with a 2x4.

But when she marches out of the room where she’s left an unconscious Grant Ward nailed to the floor in search of Garrett and finds him dead on the floor with Phil and Fury, she suddenly forgets nearly everything else.

Fury had apparently arrived with the military back-up that Coulson had been prepared to do without, and they are in the midst of cuffing and draining the Centipede soldiers that had been unable to protect Garrett, who is boxed up on the floor. She leads two soldiers to the room where she left Ward, and they peel him off after cuffing and shackling him. She does feel a little better when the pain of the nails being pried out brings him, wheezing rather than shouting, back to consciousness.

Fury has disappeared when she emerges again, but Trip and Coulson are both there to see Ward marched out, limping and sullen with a bruise already purpling his throat.

“Did you get it all out of your system?” Coulson asks as she approaches, and May rolls her eyes.

“Is he still breathing?”

“Looks like she kept a little bit to herself, then,” Coulson says to Ward, and she smirks, moving into her place beside Phil.

“He’s having a little trouble speaking,” she warns him. “I think I fractured his larynx.”

“Good. Then I’ll do the talking,” Coulson says coldly as he steps closer to Ward, his glare strong enough to cut glass. “Your attempt to cross off Fitz and Simmons failed, but Fitz may never be the same again…”

Fitz.

Simmons.

Fury must have found them.
They’re alive…they’re alive…

Skye needs to know…

She moves away from the prisoner march and out into the halls, looking for Skye, but she nearly actually collides with Fury, who emerges from the shadows with a silence that rivals her own.

“Agent May,” he mutters, dropping a hand onto her shoulder. “Your girl is safe, don’t worry. She’s taking care of the boy until his aunt gets here to pick him up. But right now, I think you and I need to go bring your plane around.”

She looks up at him, remembering how the last time she saw him was when he gave her the TAHITI folder, a new clearance level, and new orders. She had accepted because she wouldn’t have trusted anyone else to watch over Phil, and every lie, every fight, every misunderstood betrayal, was all because of what her Director had decided to do.

Bring a dead man back to life.

Before she can change her mind, she punches Fury as hard as she can across the jaw with her unbroken hand.

If he’d just stayed dead, it wouldn’t have hurt at all.

“That’s from both of us,” she says with a glare as she steps back, satisfied, but she hears Fury just chuckle as she spins and marches out ahead of him. He follows her out and orders a transport to take them to the plane.

“Agents Fitz and Simmons are alive,” he says quietly as they rumble over desert hills, dusk coming fast over the land around them. “Garrett dropped them in the Caribbean in the med-pod, but they’d managed to set up a distress beacon and then get themselves out. Agent Fitz is still in a coma, but Agent Simmons is all right. She can tell you the whole story when you get to her.”

“Where are they?” May demands, her heart leaping as they crest a ridge and her Bus comes into view.

“I’ve sent them on to a classified location,” Fury answers. “I’ll be sending you all there too once we get the mess cleaned up here. And on the way, the three of us need to have a little talk.”

Skye:

Ace holds her hand until his aunt arrives, when he breaks away to race into her arms. She hasn’t found May yet, but Trip has found her and assures her that everyone’s safe and Garrett and Ward are both taken care of, and Skye can be content with that for now. The military is here and everything is no longer up to the four of them. Soldiers take away the prisoners. Personnel empty the facility. Someone flies in their Bus and lands it just beyond the facility’s perimeter, and she guesses that’s where she’ll find everyone later.

She finds Mike standing on a ridge around the compound, watching the action below with tired eyes, injuries and cyber-enhancements hidden beneath a dirty trench coat. Skye thinks of the man she had met in a diner a few months ago, scanning the help-wanted ads and insisting that he wasn’t a hero.

You never could have predicted everything—anything—that happened next.
“Why don’t you go to him?” she asks, stepping up beside Mike, who is watching Ace and his aunt being debriefed by a soldier in the back of a truck.

“I don’t want him to see what I’ve become,” Mike says, sounding more sad than anything else.

“He won’t care about your burns,” Skye insists, her heart breaking as she looks over at him.

“That’s not what I mean,” Mike says, turning away from her.

“Coulson said to bring you in,” she calls after him, unsure of how Coulson expected her to force him to if he disagreed.

“You can access my hardware and watch my every move,” Mike says, pausing to look back at her, his eye-cam glinting. “Go ahead. I’ll only be making amends for my actions.”

*How much does he have to atone for?*

“Whatever you did,” she attempts, “you did it for Ace.”

Mike looks down. “And what I do now…that’ll be for him too.”

He moves away, disappearing into the darkness, and Skye doesn’t follow him, realizing that this is exactly what Coulson meant for her to do.

*He deserves that chance to make things right himself. Everyone deserves that chance.*

She looks back down at the facility and sees the prisoners being marched out and loaded into trucks (*Is Ward limping?*), and then she sees Coulson come out carrying something metal that looks vaguely familiar. She makes her way back down to the action below, where she finally sees May moving around at the top of the cargo ramp of their Bus. Skye’s heartbeat picks up, and she slowly moves towards her.

May already has shiners swelling on her face, a reddening line on her throat, and two swollen fingers on her right hand, but she is walking on two solid feet and looks the most satisfied that Skye has ever seen her. She glances up at Skye as she climbs the ramp, a relieved smile flitting across her face but a warning look telling Skye to *Wait.*

Coulson comes up behind her, the blaster from Peru held in his hands (*Oh that’s what that is.*)

“I think we’re going to hang on to this,” he says, carefully packing it into a case at their feet. “We’ll keep it safer than SHIELD ever did.”

“What about the prisoners?” Trip asks, and Skye has a feeling they’re all thinking of one in particular.

“We’ll let the military keep them in custody for now,” Coulson says, locking the case and strapping it down under a cargo net. “We’ve got more important things to worry about now. Like getting out of here before a certain Air Force colonel shows up.”

He looks meaningfully at May, and she nods. “Trip, go get the quinjet. I’ll have these wheels up in five, and you can dock on top once we get airborne.”

“Copy that,” Trip orders, turning and jogging back down the ramp into the night.

May catches Skye’s eye as she turns to climb the stairs up to the cabin.
Wait, her eyes say again.

Skye does.

**May:**

The quinjet is docked on top of the plane, and they’re smoothly sailing towards the coordinates that Fury radioed into the cockpit to give her, somewhere just off the eastern seaboard. Coulson buzzes in over the intercom after Trip docks the plane, asking her to come up to his office, and she smirks to herself, knowing what kind of talk is waiting.

She passes Skye and Trip sitting at the bar as she heads for the stair up to Coulson’s office. They each have a glass in front of them and are talking quietly, but she can tell that Skye is on pins and needles, waiting.

May gives her a meaningful look as she mounts the stairs.

*Sorry. Just a little longer.*

Coulson must have already gotten some of it out of his system because Fury holds up a hand only a moment after she walks in on her friend berating the seated Director.

“Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! And cruel! And very stupid!” he’s ranting.

“I think you’ve made your point,” Fury says coolly, glancing at May as she comes in.

“Why even bring me back in the first place?” Coulson demands. “Clearly I didn’t think it was a good idea! I warned you about people losing their minds!”

“Agent May was on top of the situation—she says you’re fine,” Fury says, gesturing towards her. “Aren’t you?”

She shrugs. *What was the last report you listened to, anyway?*

Coulson levels all his accusations, and Fury listens and responds patiently while May waits in an easy stance between them, watching the exchange like it’s a tennis match.

“It was a ‘break glass in case of emergency’ situation,” Fury defends calmly.

“Yes,” Phil responds exasperatedly, “but that emergency was supposed to be the fall of an Avenger!”

Fury smiles coolly, leaning forward in his chair. “Exactly.”

The man stands, dropping one hand in his pocket as he faces Coulson. “Before it was torn apart, SHIELD was a lot of moving parts. Guys like you were the heart. Now—” He pulls a small black metal cube from is pocket and holds it up for Coulson to see. “—you’ll be the head.”

May feels her brow furrow.

*What?*

Confused, Coulson reaches out and carefully takes the device from Fury. “What is it?”
“Toolbox,” Fury answers. “To help you build it back up.”

Does he mean…

Coulson looks like he’s barely breathing. “You want me to start over? Rebuild SHIELD?”

Fury nods. “From scratch. Take your time, and do it right.”

He looks over at May. “You’ll still have his back?”

It’s barely a question—she can tell that he’s asking as a formality. “Of course,” she answers.

I’ll stay where I’m needed.

Fury nods again, acknowledging both of them. “There’s no one else I’d trust with this.”

Coulson looks over at her, an amazed look on his face, and then back at Fury. “Why us?” he asks breathlessly. “Of all people, why us, sir?”

Fury smirks now, folding his arms and glancing between the two of them. “Are you asking because you’re remembering the time I conferenced your childish asses for stealing a plane for a joy ride back when you were Cadets? Or because you’re the fool who picked a time-traveler to be your pilot?”

The bottom falls out of May’s stomach, and she can’t stop the shock from showing on her face.

Oh my god…

Coulson glances at her, equally startled, but he’s the first of them to get his words working again.

“I didn’t pick a time-traveler,” he says carefully. “I picked Agent May. And that wasn’t a mistake. That will never be a mistake.”

The sincerity in his words is palpable, but May folds her arms and levels her gaze at the (former) Director, shaking her head.

“How long have you known, sir?” she asks, sounding much calmer than she feels.

Fury stares at her for a long moment until an amused smile breaks out. “So you still don’t know that I know, huh?” he says, sounding entertained. “Agent May, you’re the one who told me.”

She lets her skepticism show on her face. “When?” she asks coldly, staring him down.

Fury uncrosses his own arms, shrugging as he drops his hands into his pocket. “A few months after your mission in Bahrain, while you were supposed to still be on leave, you came marching into my office looking a little older and wiser and minus a limp and said you had a job for me as long as I wanted you to still be available to look after Coulson in a few years.”

Sounds about right, she smirks to herself, glancing at Phil, who looks equally amazed.

“You told me everything about your time-traveling,” Fury goes on, “from Bahrain to my present day—then asked me to set a search program to delete any footage of you that was doubled on any given timestamp and help your situation stay undercover. Sure would have been nice if you’d given me a heads-up about this Hydra shitshow, though…” he adds with a raised eyebrow.

May raises one right back. “If I had, would you have believed me?”
He smirks. “I might have, once you told me the coordinates of three of my secret bases—including the one you’re headed to right now—and then disappeared right out of your clothes.”

“She couldn’t have told you if she wanted to,” Phil jumps to her defense. “She can’t change the future when it’s already her past. Things can only happen the way they happen.”

“Well, what happens next is up to the two of you then,” Fury says, moving between them towards the door. “I’ll be trading in my birds-eye view for two solid feet on the ground. This is the last time you’ll be seeing me for a stretch.”

“Nowhere to be found?” Coulson asks after him, and Fury looks back with one last smirk.

“You should know better, Coulson. I’ll be everywhere.”

He offers Phil his hand.

“Good luck, Director,” he says as they shake, and May realizes that she’s watching history happen.

“Thank you, sir,” Phil says reverently. “We’ll do our best.”

“I know you will,” Fury says, nodding at her as he turns to go. “And since I already gave you this plane, I’ll be taking that quinjet for now. I’ll make sure it gets back to you eventually.”

They follow him out of the office, watching as he scales the stairs to exit the Bus into the docked quinjet, and May lets out a slow breath.

*Well, now what?*

“I’ll get back to the cockpit,” she says quietly, glancing over at her friend and thinking of who else is waiting downstairs. “Let me know if I need to change coordinates.”

**Skye:**

Walking through the cabin of their bus feels like walking through a time capsule. Barely more than two weeks ago, their team was reuniting after an aborted Christmas vacation, preparing to pick up Garrett and Hand and go out after Deathlok.

It feels like that could have been a year ago.

She and Trip have already carried any left-behind items of Garrett’s team down to the cargo hold and thrown them in a bin (hopefully to be burned later). She had slid all their bunk doors open and to find their things relatively undisturbed, but when she had caught Ward’s scent still lingering in his room, she had asked Trip if he could take care of getting rid of everything in her former S.O.’s bunk.

Trip had said yes without hesitation, an understanding look in his eyes.

Now, Skye is standing in her own bunk, taking stock of all the things still there, nearly undisturbed since their flight to Providence not even a week ago. Her clothes are still in the drawers. Her little hula-girl is still on the thin shelf. Her dirty clothes from her and May’s London excursion are still piled on the floor.

She hears feet on the stairs and quickly sticks her head out her door. May is descending the stairs quickly and moving towards the cockpit, but she catches Skye’s eye as she hurries past.
“You can come with me,” she whispers, and Skye’s heart quivers.

She doesn’t even try to make herself walk slowly after May.

May is already on the controls when she catches up with her in the cockpit. She’s communicating with someone on her headset, so Skye just carefully climbs into the co-pilot’s seat beside her. She watches May go through the movements of allowing the quinjet on the roof to detach, and it occurs to her only after the plane is banking away behind them to ask a very important question.

“Who’s flying the quinjet?” she asks when May is no longer speaking into her headset, and the woman looks over at her, a smile hinted on her lips in the darkness.

“Just another SHIELD agent,” she answers.

“And…where are we going?” Skye asks, looking at their bearing on the control panel. They’re already over Tennessee and still headed east.

“Someplace safe,” May says, taking the plane off autopilot and bringing it into a descent. “And we’re almost there.”

Skye buckles in and keeps her hands to herself while May brings them into a vertical descent over a dark stretch of land miles from any city lights. A yawning hangar roof opens in what Skye had thought was a warehouse beneath them, and May carefully brings their plane down into it. When they settle on the ground and the hangar begins to close over them again, Skye unbuckles quickly, but she looks over to find May immobile in her seat, staring at the view outside the windscreen with a furrowed brow.

“Something wrong?” Skye asks, reaching over to touch her arm gently because she can, but May just shakes her head, glancing Skye’s way with a gleam in her eye as she takes off her headset.

“No, nothing’s wrong,” she says, unbuckling and climbing out of the pilot’s seat. “Just…some things that finally make sense.”

Coulson and Trip meet them in the cabin, and Skye follows them all down to the cargo hold. She holds herself back from reaching for May’s hand as they walk, but she thinks she feels a hand brush once over her shoulder. When the ramp lowers and she sees Jemma standing in the hangar waiting for them, though, Skye nearly forgets everything else.

Jemma has a nasty shiner across one side of her face, but when Skye tackles her into a hug, her grip is strong and reassuring. It feels like a lot longer than a day since she last saw her…

“Fitz?” Skye asks when she pulls back. “Is he okay? Please tell me he’s okay.”

Jemma hesitates for a small moment before answering. “He’s alive.”

Skye doesn’t miss the pain in her voice, but May has the next question.

“What is this place?” she asks, and Skye isn’t sure if she’s talking to Jemma or Coulson.

“The first thing I found in this box was these coordinates,” Coulson says, and Skye’s brow furrows.

What box?

“Another secret base?” Coulson asks, looking over at Jemma.

“I call it the Playground,” a familiar voice says, and they all look back out towards the hangar and
“Eric?” Skye asks, dumbfounded and more than a little horrified.

“Billy,” the Eric-twin corrects her with a smile.

The first thing they all do is see Fitz.

The medical wing is attached to the base’s lab, which does have a few medical staffers in SHIELD whitecoats moving around inside it, which surprises her in the best way.

*We’re not alone. It’s not just us.*

*How many people are still out there? How many loyal agents could still be found?*

Then they round the corner and she sees Fitz.

Skye doesn’t know how many machines she was attached to when she was dying of two bullet wounds in her stomach, but she’s guessing that Fitz has her beat. Besides a cast on his arm and some bruises on his face, it doesn’t look like he’s doing anything but sleeping beneath all the machines. But what happened…

“What happened?” Coulson asks quietly for all of them, and Jemma takes a deep breath.

She tells them the story in quiet, measured syllables, about the Bus and the med-pod and the plan that has let them both be standing here alive and Fitz’s plan that he apparently expected to only save her. Skye can’t help crying as she listens, holding one of Fitz’s cool hands in her right hand and one of Jemma’s in her left. Coulson has a hand on Jemma’s shoulder the whole time, and May stands with Trip on the other side of the bed, watching and listening with heartbreak in her gaze.

“There’s no way to know what’s going to happen next,” Jemma finishes quietly, her eyes on Fitz, his face obscured behind the oxygen mask. “If he makes it through the next forty-eight hours, then he will almost certainly live. But whether he’ll wake up, or whether he’ll be the same when he does…”

The possibility is too much to think about. Skye just chokes back tears and squeezes both of their hands.

“You saved him, Simmons,” May reminds her from the other side of the bed.

Jemma still won’t look at them. “We saved each other.”

Skye squeezes her hand again.

*We’re SHIELD. That’s what we do.*

There is so much looming ahead of them if she lets herself think about it. So much to do, so much to understand, so much to face. Billy is ready to begin right away, disappearing with May and Coulson to an upstairs level, presumably to explain things that they aren’t allowed to hear, but he comes back down without them a little while later and gestures for the rest of their team to follow him.

“This will be your base of operations for the foreseeable future,” he announces, leading them down the brick tunnels on a quick tour, “so why don’t you guys move in and make yourselves at home? Women’s’ barracks are down the south hall,” he says, pointing, “and men’s are down the east hall. Agent Triplett, if you could follow me, I’ll show you where the arsenal is kept. Couldn’t hurt to get familiar with it now, with all those Hydra threats still out there…”
Skye returns to the plane alone and packs Fitz and Simmons’ things up first, moving them into two bedrooms in the base, as if preparing for a future where they are both whole and living life outside a hospital wing can ensure that it will happen. She doesn’t doubt that Jemma won’t spend a night in her own bed for a while—as she’s already been to Fitz’s room again and tucked a blanket around the scientist’s shoulders as she slept hunched over the side of his bed.

When Skye goes back to the plane for her own things, they all still fit into the same bag and box she had brought to the plane back in the summer.

*Back when you thought that finding May was the biggest thing that would ever happen to you.*

*Maybe it still will be. But there was so much more coming too.*

*Still waiting, but almost there.*

The hangar echoes around her as she walks from the plane back into the base, choosing the room across from the one she put Simmons’ things in. She is just debating whether she should go back and get May’s things and put them in another room when she turns around to find May standing in the doorway, duffle in hand.

Waiting.

For a suspended moment, they both just stand there, a few feet of space, a threshold, and a question between them. Skye looks at her, and in the moment of silence, she realizes that May is waiting to be invited in.

*After all this, does she really need to ask?*

Skye doesn’t say anything; she just holds out her hand.

May takes one step across the threshold, another two as she drops her bag on the floor, another three that bring her right into Skye’s arms. Her embrace is strong enough that Skye isn’t afraid to put everything she has into the other side of it. She holds May as tightly as she can, tight enough that there is no way for her to doubt that this is real, that this is *finally* happening. She feels the relieved, overwhelmed tears prick at her eyes, and she manages to get one word out before her throat closes up.

“*Stay,*” she gasps out into May’s shoulder, still holding her tightly, afraid to let go.

*The one thing you always promised, the one thing I’ve always wanted…*

Within the embrace, May leans back just enough that they are looking at one another, and Skye remembers the last time she held May like this—a future May that woman in her arms has never before resembled so closely.

They’re closer to that future than they’ve ever been.

“If it’s in my power,” May says, lifting her hands to cradle Skye’s face, her words leaving no room for misunderstanding, “then I’ll stay, as long as you want me to. And when I do have to go, I promise to always come back. That’s the best I can promise, but I want to promise it to you.”

Skye feels tears spilling down her cheeks, and May thumbs them gently away, waiting for an answer.

Skye doesn’t have any words anymore. So she just leans in and kisses her.
It’s everything she remembers from every kiss before, but now with the clock that had always been ticking in the background of every visit silenced at last, covered with the assurance that this moment has no endpoint looming. This one has the promise of future kisses wrapped inside of it, the possibility both invigorating and comforting, making her want to hurry into that future and at the same time reminding her that she doesn’t need to hurry at all.

May’s hands cradle her face, thread into her hair as the kiss goes on and on, slow and reassuring and right, and Skye finally pulls back only to look at May with a question in her eyes, a question May answers by reaching behind them and shutting the door.

Time isn’t wasted.

There will be time to go slow later. Right now, everything is frantic tugs and trembling hands as their shoes and shirts and pants are mutually pulled and pushed and tossed away, and when there’s nearly nothing left between them, Skye backs towards the bed, pulling May onto it after her. She barely cares what they do as long as she doesn’t have to stop touching May, running her hands over skin and scars and swollen bruises and pressing her lips against everything that isn’t hurt and most of the things that are. May is doing much of the same but also pressing urgently into every touch, every kiss, clutching at Skye’s shoulders, hips, neck, anything she can reach, as though certain that at any moment one of them will be ripped away from the other. Skye wants to take her time, wants to savor the moment and memorize everything that is happening, but May’s lips are almost leaving bruises of their own, and Skye knows she’ll have no trouble remembering this in the morning.

She is surprised when May willingly lets her settle on top, taking the lead, and Skye has to remind herself that this is May’s first time with her, even if it’s not the other way around. She pauses for only a moment to look down at May and remember the body beneath her, barely registering that some of the scars that she remembers from the last time are now missing, marks of a future that has yet to unfold…

When she drops her face to May’s chest and uses her mouth and tongue to draw sounds out of the woman beneath her, May buries her hands in her hair as if still holding on for dear life. When Skye tries to move lower, though, the hands turn strong and gently tug her back up.

“No,” May breathes, sitting up quickly, and Skye rocks back onto her knees, confused. May grips at her waist, though, pulling her back in and settling Skye’s thighs around her hips. “Not this time,” May whispers up at her, her arms wrapping around Skye’s stomach, her chin pressing gently into her breast. A hand slips between Skye’s legs, and her breath catches as she instinctively grinds down against the friction.

“Let me,” May exhales, the words barely audible, but Skye feels the whisper drift across her skin as May’s uninjured fingers glide into her. Skye breathes deeply as she rocks against her, and May’s lips part, her breath quickening, but her eyes never close, never stray from Skye’s face. Skye wraps her arms around May’s shoulders and stares right back, feeling exposed and uninhibited but unwilling to find one reason why she should feel afraid.

This feels dangerous. Not wrong, just…new.

Everything is. Everything will be.

She leans down and presses her lips to May’s and lets everything in, lets everything out.

When Skye finally shudders and slows against her, she buries her whimper in May’s hair and lets their bodies melt together, displacing any remaining negative space between them. May’s other hand smooths gently up her back, and Skye just holds on tighter, trying to also hold on to the tears that she
doesn’t want to shed now but she’s running out of space to store. But May *knows* somehow and just tips Skye carefully backward, laying her gently down and hovering over her on elbows and knees. May brushes back her hair and kisses every tear off Skye’s cheeks, matching every one with a kiss to her lips, a tenderness that just makes Skye’s heart ache more until she reaches up and pulls May down against her body again, fitting them around one another from head to toe, holding on as tightly as she can without making her hurt more, and *breathes*. Breathes through the pain of all that brought them here, breathes in the horrible uncertainty of the vast unknown ahead of them, breathes in the undeniable *miracle* of this moment.

*Alive.*

*Safe.*

*Together.*

*Here.*

*Now.*
Intermezzo

Chapter Summary

The best of times

Chapter Notes

Not promising that I'm back to regular updates just yet, but here's an ungodly amount of fluff to bring us up to the events of season 2. Please enjoy the bounty. ;)

Special thanks to Book-freak for all the writing encouragement!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

January—September, 2014: Skye is 24, May is 21, 44, 45, and 46

She has no idea what time it is or, at first, where she is as she blinks into the darkness of a windowless room. The covers cocooning her are soft against her skin, and she rolls over and fumbles for her phone, trying to remember where she left it after…

Playground.

Last night.

May.

Suddenly wide awake, she rolls over and reaches out beneath the covers for the other side of the bed, but her blind fingers only encounter an empty stretch of mattress. Confused, Skye sits up and fumbles in the dark for the lamp near the bed. As it clicks on and gold light floods the room, she sees that she is indeed alone. May’s duffle bag still sitting in the middle of the floor. The top is unzipped and the clothes look riffled through, and Skye notices that the clothes May had been wearing yesterday are still scattered on the floor between the door and the bed.

Not gone.

Just not here.

She might even be time-traveling…

For a moment, Skye contemplates just going back to sleep, but then she remembers everything else—Fitz in a hospital bed and Jemma sleeping in a chair; Coulson the new Director and another Koenig in an underground base—and she realizes that she has no idea what is happening outside her door.

May could be out there doing something important.

The air is cold as she pushes back the comforter and swings her legs out of bed, and Skye is very
aware of how little she’s wearing as goosebumps rise on all her exposed skin. She grabs the nearest shirt—May’s thermal from the day before—and pulls it on, then goes to her own duffle to fish out a clean pair of underwear and a pair of yoga pants. Fishing her phone out of the pocket of yesterday’s jeans, she sees that it’s barely seven a.m. local time.

*World’s still turning.*

*You’re still SHIELD.*

*Get out there and join it.*

She grabs a hoodie out of her bag and starts to move towards the door, and all of a sudden, May is there.

May seems equally surprised to see Skye on the other side of the door as she opens it, but she controls her reaction better than Skye, who jumps but manages to catch her gasp in her throat.

“Sorry,” May says quickly, slipping through the door and shutting it quietly again behind herself as Skye backs out of her way. “I thought you’d still be asleep.”

“You're up early,” Skye says, taking in May's fresh clothes and damp hair.

May only shrugs, however. “You’ll get used to it,” she says, holding out the mug in her hand.

“Coffee?” she offers quietly, meeting Skye’s gaze almost hesitantly. “I don’t know how you take it, but—”

Skye walks right through the offering and kisses her.

She makes sure not to crash into May too hard and spill scalding water on them both, but Skye meets her by cradling May’s face in her hands and holding her in the kiss for a long, sustained moment, long enough to reassure herself that May is really there and that she didn’t just imagine that last night happened. May, understandably, doesn’t move at first, but Skye eventually feels May’s free hand land on her hip and then slide around her back to hold her carefully in a gentle embrace…

When Skye finally pulls back and opens her eyes, May looks a little disoriented, but her gaze quickly zeroes in on Skye’s even as she continues to hold her close.

“Before you do that again,” May finally says in a voice that sounds a little raspy, “you and I need to talk.”

Skye raises an eyebrow but doesn’t let go of May just yet. “I can’t believe I’m hearing you say that,” she says with a smirk, a little surprised by how hoarse her own voice sounds.

May steps smoothly out of Skye’s embrace though and moves past her to sit on the foot of the bed. “Come on over here and sit down,” she says, patting the space beside her. “We’ve gotta figure this out now before we go out there and face everyone else.”

Skye follows eagerly and sits down beside her, and May again holds out the cup of coffee (*seriously, how did she hold onto that this entire time?*). Skye takes the proffered mug and brings the hot drink to her lips, and May, surprisingly, talks.

“Last night, before I came in here,” she begins, hesitantly meeting Skye’s gaze over the rim of the cup, “Coulson made me Deputy Director and tasked me with overseeing any and all specialists on our team for the foreseeable future.”
Surprised, Skye quickly lowers her mug, swallowing a scalding sip.

“Uh, congratulations?” she says slowly, turning more fully towards May and resting the cup on her knee. “What…what does that mean, exactly?”

May seems to be watching Skye’s reaction carefully as she responds. “First,” she says, “it’s going to mean that I am your direct supervisor, which complicates things a little. There have always been rules about agents dating their direct supervisors—”

“Good thing there’s no SHIELD anymore,” Skye interrupts with a teasing smile, but the somberness in May’s tone makes it evaporate almost immediately.

“We’re SHIELD now,” the woman reminds her, and Sky glances away, chastised.

“I know,” she mutters, staring down into her mug until May reaches over and touches her free hand.

“The first thing I requested, though,” May goes on, and Skye looks up at her, “was to officially be noted as your S.O…if that’s something you still want.”

Skye can’t stop the smile from spreading across her face. “You really think I’d change my mind in 24 hours?” she asks with a grin, but May seems to be waiting for a real answer, so Skye turns her hand palm-up and squeezes May’s fingers. “Yes, May, of course,” she says with all the reassurance she can put into her voice. “Of course I still want to train with you.”

Relief is evident in May’s eyes, but she purses her lips rather than smiling.

“I was hoping you would say that…” she says slowly, “…but that’s going to complicate things a little bit, too.” Her thumb slides gently over the backs of Skye’s fingers, making Skye’s heart flutter a little. “I want you to help you become a good agent, Skye, but that’s going to mean a lot of long, hard training, and you might not like me quite as much once I’ve put you through what the next few months would entail.”

Skye can only smile. “May, this—” She gestures vaguely at the space between them “—has been twenty years in the making. I don’t think you putting me through boot camp could possibly make me love you any less.”

The L-word seems to catch May off-guard, but Skye doesn’t miss the slight softening in May’s expression even as she refuses to be distracted from the topic at hand.

“It’s not easy to have it both ways,” she says, a slight warning in her tone, “and I would hate for your training to be the thing that comes between us. I know you want it both ways, and I want that too, but I want it to be sustainable, so there are rules we need to figure out before we give this a shot.”

Skye nods because she can’t speak around the joy inflating in her chest.

She wants that too…

“Being together day and night can wear people down fast,” May goes on, still gazing sternly at Skye. “Trust me, I’ve been on enough missions to know. So I want us to have our own spaces, even if we barely use one or the other. I’m going to move my stuff into the room at the front of the hall. You’re welcome there…any time. But I want you to have a place you can go without me there when you want or need it—especially on the days when you’re—”

“No.”
Skye says it quietly, but she doesn’t let herself look away as May’s brow lifts in surprise.

“No?” May repeats, almost a dare to say it again, and Skye doubles down and shakes her head.

“No,” she repeats quietly, setting her now-empty coffee cup down on the floor beside the bed and taking May’s other hand in hers. “May,” she says, pulling both legs up on the bed until she’s sitting cross-legged facing the other woman, “I’ve spent twenty years waiting for this—for the time when you and I are together in the same time and place and finally able to share everything that we could possibly share. So if you and I can be together, then I want that, and I’ll take everything that means. I believe you when you say it’s going to be hard, but I want to learn how to deal with it because I love you. So can we at least try it?”

She hadn’t meant for that to sound like an ultimatum, but it comes out like one anyway.

**Do you want to try it? It’s going to be hard, but is it worth it to you? Do you love me?**

Skye knows she’s asking a lot. She’s known May for twenty years, May has known her for four months. Skye’s known this was coming for years; May just got wise the day before yesterday. But Skye has also spent months keeping all this to herself, and for the first time, she doesn’t feel afraid to tell May exactly what she wants from her—for them.

And, thankfully, it seems May is willing to listen.

May eventually sighs and shifts until she’s also sitting fully on the bed, mirroring Skye’s position, their hands still clasped one inside the other.

“We can try it,” she says softly, and Skye smiles in joy and relief.

“Okay,” she breathes, squeezing May’s hands in hers. May smiles cautiously back, then glances around the room.

“Two women in one bunk…” she says slowly, as if getting used to the idea. “We might need a second dresser.”

“I don’t have much,” Skye says honestly, glancing at her bag sitting open on the floor near May’s duffle.

“Me neither,” May says, and Skye catches her eye with a smile.

“We could share,” she offers.

May raises one eyebrow as she glances down at Skye’s chest. “You’re already wearing my shirt.”

Skye feels the bloom of joy behind her ribs growing, and she smiles wider. “I loaned you clothes for twenty years. Your point?”

May smiles then, and in the overflow of happiness, Skye leans in to kiss her, but the woman stops her with a soft fingertip against her lips.

“One more thing,” May says quickly, and Skye opens her eyes, surprised. May looks, if possible, a little more nervous than before. “I told you that Coulson named me Deputy Director.”

“And I said congratulations,” Skye repeats, letting herself sound a little impatient as she straightens up again, but May only nods, glancing down as she continues.

“I’m reminding you because I want to be up-front with you, Skye,” she says quietly. “One of the
things that being Deputy going to mean is that I'll have extra responsibilities, including being in certain exclusive meetings with him and knowing things that not everyone can know.”

Skye nods, understanding. “Things I can’t know,” she says glumly, and May nods.

“Yeah,” the woman says, finally glancing up and meeting Skye’s gaze. “Can you be okay with that?”

*Because we don’t really have much of a choice…*

Skye hesitates for a moment, thinking of all the ways that she had thought May was withholding information from her in her past—all the things that Future May knew that she refused to tell Skye, all the secrets Present-Day May had kept even on the Bus…

*It might just be one thing that never changes. Can you live with that?*

She looks up at May and knows it’s never really been a question.

“Okay,” Skye whispers with a small nod. “I can live with that.”

May nods back, her gaze telling Skye that she knows this wasn’t easy. “Okay.”

A short silence fills the air between them, but May, surprisingly, is the one who breaks it.

“I guess the last thing we need to talk about is boundaries,” she says, seeming a little uncomfortable. “If I’m going to be your supervising officer and your significant other, we obviously can’t behave like both all the time.”

Skye smiles to herself at the idea of it. “I don’t know—I think I would work pretty hard for you if you offered certain rewards for my effort…”

May makes an impatient but not awful face at her. “Skye, come on. You know what I’m talking about. We need to just agree ahead of time that when I’m training you, that isn’t the time for flirting or distracting each other or messing around. Not until we’re off the clock.”

“Don’t worry, I can control myself for a few hours a day, May,” Skye responds with a smirk. “You’re not asking much.”

“And another thing,” May adds, pressing against Skye’s palm with her thumb, “PDA.”

Surprised, Skye waits for May to clarify, which she does with visible caution.

“I’m not saying this because I’m ashamed or embarrassed about what we have,” May says slowly, holding Skye’s gaze, “but outside of this room, you and I are living in our workplace, which probably isn’t going to change, so there’s going to be certain ways we need to behave. I know you love me, but because we both love our team, can you wait until we’re alone to show me?

“Does this mean I’m not allowed to kiss you outside of this room?” Skye asks quietly, unable to ignore the slight deflation in her chest. “Or show how I’m kind of…crazy about you? I mean…I’ve been keeping it a secret for months. I know I could keep it a little longer if you want… I just don’t want to.”

May must see something convincing in Skye’s expression, because she responds by squeezing her hands gently.

“Let’s play it by ear,” May offers quietly. “I don’t mind the idea. If I talked more, I’d probably want
to tell people about you, too. So much of this is going to be something so new for me. It’s just going to take some getting used to.”

Skye smiles again cautiously. “So…is this official? Are you my…”

She knows May can hear the unspoken term in the silence as she trails off, remembering how Future May had always staunchly refused to put a header on their relationship whenever Skye had begged her in the past to tell her what they would one day be to one another. Sitting across from her now, “girlfriend” doesn’t feel like the right word anyway. This is more than that. It always has been.

And she can tell from the look in May’s eyes that the woman knows what she’s thinking because she smiles and shifts marginally closer, their knees bumping on the bed.

“You can call me that if you want to, Skye, but I’m happy to just be your significant other. Your S.O.”

And that…that is just so perfect that Skye can’t help leaning forward and planting a joyful, lingering kiss on May’s lips. She pulls her hands out of May’s only so she can reach up and cradle the woman’s face again, holding on mostly so she can be sure that she gets her message across. She feels one of May’s hands cover hers, skim down her arm, and Skye almost can’t believe that this is really, finally happening…

She’s satisfied by the stars in May’s eyes that she see when she pulls away, but May looks like she’s attempting to scowl as their faces linger close together.

“You taste like coffee,” the woman grumbles, and Skye just smiles and shakes her head.

“If you’re going to make me get up at five, you’ll have to get used to it,” she says with a grin. “And now, I have a question.”

May raises an eyebrow. “Yes?”

“Should I call you ‘Melinda’?”

May seems a little surprised by the question, but then she smiles.

“You can call me whatever you want,” she says easily, barely shrugging.

“Okay, babe,” Skye responds with a grin, and she’s hardly surprised when May winces but recovers quickly with an eye-roll.

“Okay, maybe not whatever you want…”

“I’m good with ‘May’ if that’s still okay with you,” Skye says. “It’s always been your name to me. It’s what you told me to call you when I first met you, it’s what everyone else calls you. It would be a hard habit to break.”

“Fine by me,” May says with another shrug. “Names changes are hard to get used to.

Skye smiles. “All right. Cool. May.”

There’s a slight pause, and Skye waits, wondering what’s next.

“Do we need to go out there and start training right now?” Skye asks slowly, reaching out and setting a light hand on May’s nearest knee.
May looks over at her, a knowing look in her eye.

“Even if we did, I certainly wouldn’t let you go out for it in such a filthy shirt,” she teases, and before Skye realizes what is happening, May's tugging the garment up over Skye’s head, balling the dirty shirt up and tossing it towards the corner of the room.

May’s hands are on her skin and Skye is grinning like an idiot as the woman kisses her again, and she tips back until she’s pressed between May and the mattress as they squirm away from the edge until there’s plenty of space on all sides of them…

She manages to get May’s shirt off quickly, but she can tell that May is determined to run the show this time, so Skye isn’t even surprised when May catches her hands and pins them against the mattress, hovering over her with a mischievous glint in her eye.

“So…after last night, we’re even now,” May says in a challenging tone, but Skye shakes her head with a smirk.

“Well, if you want to keep score, I think that technically, until you make it to that last visit, I’ll always have one up on you,” she says, thinking of the night that she has spent with May that May has yet to spend with her.

But May doesn’t look worried as she drops her face into Skye’s neck and starts trailing kisses down her throat, over her collarbone, across her chest…

“So…your first time with me…” she murmurs, the words tickling against Skye’s skin, “…was it memorable?”

Skye’s quickly losing her ability to form a coherent sentence, and she buries a hand in May’s hair as the woman’s administrations make her back arch involuntarily off the bed.

“Oh god yeah…” she gasps, holding on even as she feels May moving lower, tugging at her waistband.

“I mean, it was kind of one-sided of course…”

She lets go of May’s hair as the woman sits up to pull off Skye’s pants and underwear and abandon them on the floor…

“…since it was my first time with you but you had a couple of years of practice to go on…”

May’s lips are back on her skin and leaving a trail down the inside of her thigh…

“...and I know it won’t be the same from your end…but God, May, I can’t wait for you to remember that night too…”

A puff of air and a strange hum tickle her skin, and Skye opens her eyes and lifts her head to see May’s face still buried in her thigh, her shoulders shaking slightly, but it’s only when May barely lifts her head and Skye sees the brightness in her eyes and the look on her face that she realizes May is… laughing. Not the condescending huff or the silent scorn that Skye has gotten so used to seeing in the past few months, but the sincere, wonderful sound of joy that Skye once knew so well from memories of simpler times. It seems so strange to be hearing it again here, of all times and places, and this just makes Skye laugh too, her stomach quivering beneath May’s hand, and they might as well pause here so Skye grabs May’s hand and pulls her up so that she can kiss the smile on May’s lips as long as it’s there…
“We are, without a doubt, the weirdest couple I know,” May mutters between kisses, pressing her forehead against Skye’s.

“It’s funny the way things happen, isn’t it?” Skye whispers back, pulling May into another kiss.

It’s the beginning of what they only know later as the best of times.

---

**May:**

The changes are numerous.

It’s as though everything reset the day that their team landed at the Playground since the world they live in now bears almost no resemblance to the life from before. New faces, new relationships, new home, new world. And learning how to live in this new world is its own daily internal adjustment.

The days immediately following their arrival are a slow turn of suspended animation as they learn and research, reach out and wait. Everything is done carefully—there’s no one to take their place if they go wrong this time. Everyone they contact has to be carefully vetted, so for a few days, no one joins them at the Playground except for Fury’s personal staff of trustworthy medics, who are mostly there for Fitz. Koenig is essential in picking up threads, reaching out to his “brothers” on secure connections and slowly drawing lines for them across the globe. Trip, still the newest to their circle, is ready for action, but he has the same careful restraint that any Specialist has perfected—and, most importantly, a willingness to trust his new leader, even after what happened to the last one.

Simmons barely leaves the medical wing, and their team’s rotation through Fitz’s room quickly becomes more about caring for her than checking on him. The coma remains stagnant even as his body attempts to heal, but no one misses the way Simmons is dropping weight and gaining an unhealthy cast to her skin. Skye spends as much time with both of them as she can in between Coulson’s assignments for her (many of which she works on her laptop while sitting at Fitz’s bedside) and beginning her training with May. May does her best to leave Skye as much time as she can for caring for her friends—it’s no less important than everything else they need to do. She makes sure both the girls eat and sleep an acceptable amount, but for the most part, May takes care of Coulson while Skye takes care of Simmons, who takes care of Fitz while Trip floats between all of them, doing what he can. They’re all just doing their best to keep one another going, and it’s needed.

Fitz wakes up on the ninth day after they arrive at the Playground, and thus begins the longer road. Most of the damage was contained to his frontal and temporal lobes, so the greatest lingering effect is his motor control and speech ability. It seems like he recognizes everyone right away, can comprehend everything he hears, but it takes him nearly a month to relearn to walk. He can barely feed himself because of his hand tremors and arm spasms. And though it seems like most of the knowledge from before is still stored safely in his brain, it’s painful for all of them to watch a boy who could once name the chemical and physical properties of every element in the periodic table backwards suddenly struggling to communicate simple thoughts. It’s as though everything is still there, but all the channels have been disrupted, connections between synapses blown out by the hypoxia of nearly drowning. Only time and practice will build new ones, and no one is more frustrated about this than him.

As their time in the underground base quickly turns into the longest stretch they’ve been grounded in months, they all gradually become claustrophobic in the subterranean space. They don’t surface at all from the Playground for nearly five weeks. Coulson says it’s for security reasons, but May starts to resent it after a while. She isn’t sure if it’s actually the plane that she misses, or just the “innocence” of the time their team spent on it.
Being Deputy director means the return of her administrative duties, though every matter she handles seems far more critical now that there is no one working under her. She never thought she would find herself here, helping Coulson make decisions that will affect the entire organization, but that’s exactly what they’re doing, day in and day out. Sometimes, it’s hard to put the thoughts to bed at night, to stop thinking of the world outside their base and the hundreds of people that they are slowly connecting with again to try to build this organization back up…

But then, of course, there’s Skye.

After several years of living alone, adjusting to the constant presence of another person in her day and night is as hard as she expected it to be, but also more wonderful than she could have expected. It takes her several weeks to get used to waking up with another person snuggled into her chest, her back, her side—rarely does she wake up and not find Skye sleeping bodily against her in some capacity. Sometimes, Melinda takes a second and just basks in the moment—the second heartbeat and breath, occasionally synced with her own, the fan of dark hair cascading across the pillow beside hers, the trusting nearness that is in itself a miracle...But they’re not just a couple, they’re also S.O. and trainee, so May never lingers too long before nudging the girl awake and coaxing her out of bed to start the day. For a little while, their ragtag team is all that SHIELD has, and May knows she has to prepare Skye for everything they could possibly face in the months ahead.

Skye meets every challenge May sets before her (almost) without complaint, and May watches her stamina and confidence increase quickly throughout those first few weeks. The strength training boot camp that May puts her through nearly wipes Skye out the first month, so it takes them almost two months of hand-to-hand combat training before May decides she’s ready for a sparring match.

“Why am I not practicing with you?” Skye asks when May brings in Trip to be Skye’s sparring partner.

“The people you’ll be meeting in the field are much more likely to be his size than mine,” May answers, but she does tell Skye the other reason later, once the match is over and Skye is hunched over, nursing a bruise on her ribs as well as her pride.

“I don’t want to spar with you if I can help it,” May whispers as she crouches near Skye’s knees and lifts the ice pack to check the bruise, “because I don’t want you to carry a memory or ever think that I would hurt you. I’ll direct your learning and correct your form, but I don’t plan to ever be on the other side of a fight with you.”

Skye’s brow crinkles. “You already made me point a gun at you,” she says, and May thinks of a sunny morning in Italy only a day before two bullets went through Skye’s stomach. “How is this different?”

May smirks and starts helping Skye unwind the athletic tape from her wrists. “There are enough reasons for you to hate me without me adding bruises to the list,” she answers, thinking of the training regime she’s put on Skye for the past two months. “And anyway—what’s the point of sparring with me when you know I’d wipe the floor with you?”

When they’re alone, Skye is shameless in her affection, and May eventually learns to anticipate the touches before they startle her. It takes time for her to get used to them, but she’s far from ungrateful. She constantly reminds herself that Skye is coming in with twenty years of memories and love. As always, Melinda constantly feels like she’s just trying to catch up.

Once the cabin fever has set in and they’re all nearly bouncing off the walls trying to keep calm for another day underground, May makes the excuse to Coulson that she and Skye need a run outdoors every now and then to work on terrain stamina. He approves it as long as they go out before dawn,
and May finally gets back in the driver’s seat to take their SUV out to a trail in a park several miles south of their base. Skye sleeps on the way out and manages the run like a pro, but when they get back to the car just after the sun as seared the sky gold, she suddenly jumps May and presses her back against the car, kissing her until the run is no longer the reason that May is breathless.

“Is this a ‘thank you’ for getting you out of the base?” May eventually manages to ask, not really minding Skye’s enthusiasm but not really loving the location.

“It’s just nice to be somewhere with you besides our room where I can kiss you and not worry,” Skye mutters, nuzzling at May’s neck while sliding her fingertips along her stomach beneath the hem of her shirt.

“Skye, we’re still in the middle of a parking lot,” May reminds her. “It’s not exactly private.”

“Let’s get in the backseat,” Skye suggests suddenly, lifting her head and grinning at May. “For old time’s sake.”

May raises an eyebrow. “Old time’s sake?”

Skye’s grin turns sheepish. “Remember what I said we did during your last visit to me a few years ago?”

“Yeah…?” May acknowledges, trying to figure out where this is going.

Skye glances away, still looking smug. “Well, you know, that’s when I was in California, so I was living in my van at that time…”

And then the pieces fall into place.

“Oh my god…” May mutters, closing her eyes and letting her head fall back against the side of the car. “Are you telling me that we had sex in a van?”

“If it makes it better, it was more like a dorm room on wheels, but yeah, we absolutely did,” Skye says, and May opens her eyes to see Skye suddenly seeming nervous, that same fear of disappointment that rears its ugly head every now and then…

May tugs Skye in by the strap of her tank top into another kiss, then reaches behind herself and opens the backseat door. Skye grins as she climbs in behind her, clambering on top of May as soon is the door is shut and pressing her down into the bench seat.

“I’ve fallen prey to the worst of clichés…” May mutters with a reluctant smile, dipping her hands into the waistband of Skye’s leggings as the girl pulls May’s shirt up and over her head.

“Memorable. Not cliché,” Skye responds with a grin, pulling off her own shirt and lying down against May again, beginning to work her lips over May's newly-exposed skin.

A memory suddenly surfaces, and May tugs Skye’s hair until the girl looks up at her. “Was that why you looked at me all expectantly when I got in your van with you the first time, the day I met you?”

Skye smiles sheepishly. “I was wondering if it would jog your memory…” she says, rocking up on her elbows and kissing May’s lips once. “But I’m okay with just giving you a new one.”

May smiles up at her knowingly.

“You’ve been planning this for awhile, haven’t you?” she murmurs, and Skye’s expression gives it
away even before she ducks her head and begins kissing her way down May’s body again.

“I don’t hear you complaining,” she murmurs smugly, and May closes her eyes, drowning all over again in how unbelievable this whole thing is.

“Never,” she whispers, just before her word turns into a gasp.

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**Skye:**

For as many years as Skye had spent imagining the life she’d share with May one day, she never could have imagined it would be like this.

The training is exhausting but still a wonderful excuse to have May all to herself, to have the woman’s full attention, and to see her in her glorious element as an Agent of SHIELD. May keeps her usual direct, unapologetic persona on during those times, and once Skye is used to the abrupt change as soon as they walk out the door, she learns just how far May will let her go in an attempt to draw her softer side out. Skye keeps her word of not wasting their time by distracting May during training, but she can’t help risking a flirtatious look or line every now and then. May allows it to a certain point, but is always firm on the lines that won’t be crossed outside their bedroom.

Still, Skye can’t stop touching her.

She only risks a passing brush of her hand in the training room, a brief half-embrace when they’re in the kitchen for a meal, rocking her knee over to bump May’s whenever they’re sitting beside each other…mostly, it’s just about reminding herself that May is finally really there and this is really, finally happening. When they’re alone, however, she traces the shapes between the tan lines on her back, memorizes the texture of every patch of skin, and maps the scattered scars on her body. As a kid, Skye had asked about the ones that were easy to see—like the ones on May’s legs—but the ones across her abdomen are new territory for her. May doesn’t volunteer the stories, but Skye sometimes asks, and May regales her with a story from a mission long past.

“Deep insurgency, Libya. I was only a few years out of Academy. Thought I’d already disarmed the guy, but he had a boot knife.”

“Field assignment in Juarez during my second year of the Academy. Got thrown on a junk pile during a fight. They had to pull broken glass out of three different places.”

“Hysterectomy. A few months after I started traveling.”

Skye knows what that word means now and why May had it done. She traces the tiny scars on May’s abdomen and says nothing.

She recognizes the initial hesitance in the way May touches her…as though she still can’t believe that she not only can but should. It takes a few weeks for it to wear off, or at least for Skye to stop noticing it. It takes a little longer for May’s laugh to come without sounding like it’s shaking off cobwebs. As the woman gradually relaxes around her though and everything she does becomes more fearless, it feels to Skye like the end of a long winter. She loves seeing May smiling, unguarded and peaceful, almost as much as she loves seeing her writhing, gasping, and needy beneath her. For both, she mostly loves knowing that she’s the reason for it.

Surprisingly, the hardest thing to get used to is the time travel.

It’s strange, since this was the one thing Skye thought she was already prepared for—May disappearing without warning. But she’s never actually watched her leave the present, she’s barely
ever seen her come back from the past, and she certainly hasn’t seen May disappear while asleep.

The first time she wakes up to May climbing back in bed from some other time and place, Skye at first feels guilty that she hadn’t noticed May was gone. The woman waves off her murmured apologies, however, just wrapping around Skye in a gentle embrace, and shushing her quietly.

“I was in my parents’ house in Montgomery,” May whispers in the darkness over her shoulder. “My mom made me sit down to dinner with my dad and my twelve-year-old self.”

Skye rolls over within her embrace and demands the whole story. It becomes something like a tradition if she wakes up to May coming back.

“My parents’ house in Alexandria. But sometime before we moved in or after we moved out. Had to outrun a dog in the backyard.”

“My office in the Triskellion. Middle of the night. Sometime before this winter.”

“A hot morning in Albuquerque. You were six.”

When they are visits to Skye, her return is different. May shakes her awake and thrusts the List at her, and she and Skye mark off the date, a memory that they now, finally, share. She asks for Skye’s memories, what she was thinking, or why she said something, and Skye gets to guess again at the meaning of May’s words, twenty years too late.

It always ends with Skye kissing the smile on May’s lips. Often, it ends with other things.

One night, Skye wakes up to May climbing back into bed sans clothes, and Skye shamelessly slides over on the bed until she’s close enough to wrap a gentle arm around May’s ribs. This time, May is quiet, thinking loudly into the silence of their room, and her skin feels hot under Skye’s touch. When Skye finally asks where she was, May instead responds with a question.

“You used to think I was your mother?”

Skye’s heart breaks as May reminds her of the tear-filled conversation on a park bench in Indiana, and she leans closer and rests against May’s heart until the woman has finished the whole story.

“How long did you carry that idea around, Skye?” May finally asks, rolling over so that they’re facing one another on the shared pillow, and Skye looks down, unable to meet May’s eyes.

“A couple of years, maybe. It was an idea made sense to a little girl who just wanted the world to make sense. Not having parents was the reason I kept getting moved, I thought, and I just wanted to know that my mother really was out there somewhere. Bonus points that she was a time-traveler, because, come on, how cool is that?”

May is silent in the face of her attempted levity, and the way she’s looking at her when Skye finally glances up nearly breaks Skye’s heart in a different way.

“Hey,” Skye says quickly, wrapping an arm around May and bringing their bodies together beneath the blanket. “I’m glad I was wrong. I mean, it would be amazing to be related to you, but I’m glad I’m not your daughter because then we couldn’t--”

May cuts her off with a gentle pinch to Skye’s side beneath the blanket, and Skye giggles, flinching away.

She can hear the smile in May’s voice. “Let’s just mutually agree to never say the words ‘mom’ and
*daughter* when we’re in bed together. Deal?*

Skye laughs a little harder, relieved. “Deal.”

The first time Skye actually wakes up to May having a nightmare, she at first doesn’t know what is happening. It’s actually the slight tremor in the mattress that wakes her, but once she’s awake she hears the small sounds.

Beside her, May is curled on her side, seemingly sound asleep, but her arms and legs are occasionally twitching, her breathing is shallow and fast—

“*May,*” Skye whispers, reaching towards her with one hand, but before their skin touches, May is suddenly gone.

Skye reaches out and touches the still-warm t-shirt and the empty covers as the duvet settles soundly back onto the mattress. She gets up with her laptop and tries to stay awake until May gets back, but when she wakes up again, it’s to May gently tugging the computer out from beneath her arm and setting it safely on the nightstand before climbing back into bed and curling into Skye’s embrace.

“My old apartment in the DC area,” May says, tucking herself around Skye. “I wasn’t home.”

May’s not the only one who has nightmares, though.

The first time Skye wakes up to May gripping her hand and steadily repeating her name, she is still so wrapped in the terrifying images that she swings blindly at the woman and nearly falls off the bed trying to get away from her touch.

“You’re safe, you’re safe,” May is whispering, letting go of Skye’s hand when she continues to pull away, whimpering. “Take a deep breath. You’re safe. It’s okay.”

Skye presses a hand over her own mouth against a painful sob, and May reaches over to flip on the lamp. Blinding light makes Skye bury her face in the pillow, but not before she sees the pain written all over May’s face. She curls in on herself and tries to hold on to everything tightly enough that the pain doesn’t have any room to rattle inside her, but she can’t stop the tears from spilling out onto her cheeks.

“You’re safe,” May continues repeating in a whisper, her hand resting near Skye but not reaching out to touch her. “You’re safe.”

“I hate him so much, May,” Skye finally manages in a strangled whisper, finally shifting closer so that May can wrap her arms around her. Skye puts her head against her chest and focuses on the familiar rhythm of May’s heartbeat until it’s all she can hear.

May doesn’t ask who he is. She doesn’t ask her if she wants to talk about it. And it’s only then that Skye realizes that for all the time-travel stories she has asked from May, she has no idea what terrible nightmares have carried her there.

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**May:**

She had no idea it could be like this.

By the time winter is fading into a wet, chilly spring, the two of them have fallen into a rhythm of familiarity. They train, they rest, she assists Coulson, she travels, and Skye is waiting when she comes back. SHIELD grows around them, little by little, and Skye grows under her by leaps and
bounds. Fitz is walking and eating unassisted, but he still sometimes needs help getting dressed and his motor control is a constant fight with his own body that May can tell Skye hates to watch. Coulson has left the base on more than a few occasions now, returning with new faces and intel every time. He’s talking about getting some undercover agents planted in Hydra soon.

When he cautiously suggests to May that Simmons would probably rise fast through Hydra’s ranks, she only nods, resigned.

“I’ll tell her we’re resuming weapons training soon. You find her a home and make sure it’s safe.”

The biochemist is still withdrawn, but her health seems to have improved right along with Fitz’s throughout the past few months. She has been more or less running the set-up of the Science division of their fledgling SHIELD, which seems a welcome distraction from all the ways she can’t help her best friend get better. Her eyes have a low-lit melancholy in them now, and Simmons now projects and aura of experience as well as intelligence. The crackling excitement that characterized the scientist in those early months on the Bus has all but disappeared, and May hates that she wasn’t able to protect her from that. She hates Ward for taking that from Simmons. She hates herself for knowing that things will only get harder for the girl and not being able to fix it.

May would like to think that the growth she’s seeing is the result of Simmons adapting to her new position as a department head, but May knows the truth—she’s different because she’s being forced to re-learn everything. Just like when May put on a pair of ice skates thirty years after she’d last taken them off, Simmons is doing familiar things but with the awful added weight—the weight of responsibility, experience, and loss. For the first time since Academy, she’s doing everything on her own, without her other half right beside her.

The remnants of SHIELD trickle in through the months; some as young as Simmons and some as old as May. Most Agents older than herself took the option of early retirement, and, though she hates thinking of it, May knows that most of the oldest Agents were in command positions and fell with SHIELD that day. Coulson is slowly expanding into his role as Director, and though she knows he will never be the same kind of leader Fury was, she’s proud of the way he remains very much himself even within his new role. She watches him watching the world, gathering frayed threads and coaxing them gently into a new design and feels so proud.

Then she watches him carving at night and feels nothing but despair.

She makes sure that she comes back to her room on those nights with all the plaster washed off her skin after they re-cover the wall (for the next time he carves), because she knows that it’s only a matter of time before Skye notices something wrong with Coulson too, and she doesn’t want to be the one who let the secret out. Most nights, Skye is still awake waiting for her. May sheds her shoes and pants, climbs into bed beside her, and says nothing when Skye asks what she’s been doing.

They’ve seen one another’s bodies enough times that by now that May has Skye’s mapped like a well-worn trail. Behind closed doors, May touches the scars that Skye hides from the rest of the world, some that she’s familiar with and some that are new to her. Skye wants to hear the uncensored stories of every scar on May’s skin, but May doesn’t ask Skye to tell her war stories. The lines on her wrist and forearm and thighs, the bullet scars on her stomach…those are memories that Skye should never be asked to relive. The only scar May ever asks about is the burn on Skye’s foot and ankle, a small patch of scar tissue that May had never noticed before.

“I don’t remember getting it,” Skye answers when May asks about it as they lace up their shoes one morning, and May looks over at her, surprised. “No, really,” Skye repeats with a shrug. “I have no idea how or when it got there, so I must have been really little whenever it happened. It’s a pretty small patch of skin now, which makes me think the scar stayed the same size while I kept growing.”
She doesn’t seem worried about it, but May imagines a long list of foster families and even a village in Hunan and wonders what other pain Skye has been lucky enough to forget.

Sometimes they look at the list together as they lie in bed, with Skye sharing her memories and May trying to picture how Skye will look at that age.

“This one will be in north Texas,” Skye says one night, pointing to a date from 1997 on the list. “I don’t remember much about the family, but I remember that I had this awful haircut that year. I remember crying about how much I hated it, and this particular foster mom said I was lucky she was willing to pay for a haircut at all. I think that’s the shortest my hair has ever been in my life.”

“I bet you looked cute,” May says with a smile, dragging her fingers gently through Skye’s long, dark waves. “It is a little strange to picture you with short hair, though.”

“That was the day you told me about comets and stars,” Skye says, smiling as she glances up at May. “The whole ‘gravity and orbits’ story.”

“You realize that I’m going to tell that to you in the future because you told me in my past, right?” May reminds her, smiling as she traces constellations between Skye’s freckles.

“And I told you in the past because you’ll tell me in the future,” Skye says, turning and pressing a kiss against the underside of May’s jaw.

May closes her eyes and lets herself drown in the impossible reality for just a moment. Past and future have blurred together, two concepts of time that she lost her grip on long ago. There might be a scientific explanation somewhere out there, but for now, May is satisfied with knowing that there is a center to her orbit now, a star in the void, holding relentlessly onto her and pulling her back to its brightness.

It’s enough to make her smile even when no one can see it.

“How do you still wonder about your birth parents?” she asks, looking over at Skye, nearly dozing off beside her.

Without opening her eyes, the girl sighs. “Sometimes,” she admits, obviously trying to say it lightly. “I mean, it’s almost a relief to know that they’re dead and didn’t just abandon me, but yeah, sometimes I wonder what they looked like, why they were in China, why I’m an 084 and if that has anything to do with them…”

She trails off, opening her eyes, and May realizes that her hand has gone still against Skye’s skin.

“It doesn’t hurt anywhere near as bad as it used to,” the girl murmurs, squirming closer and curling in against May. “It just…I wonder, you know?”

May moves her hand to brush gently along the curves of Skye’s face, taking in all the details and letting herself wonder too, what the parents who made such a beautiful person might have looked like. She had long forgotten what relationship the numbers 0, 8, and 4 had had with Skye, and the mystery swells up again in her mind.

**How could you forget about that?**

**How could you think Skye would ever stop wondering about where she came from?**

“I think they’d be proud of you,” May says, echoing the words she once told a ten year-old on a park bench.
Skye smiles, soft as sunshine. “I hope so.”

May leans in and kisses Skye’s lips softly, and the girl tips her face up, melting into the kiss as she slides a hand up May’s neck and into her hair, pulling her closer, deeper. May lets Skye pull her in, joining her orbit, relaxing into everything that is warm and welcoming and for once not thinking about all the debris she’s trailing behind herself in her own perpetual travel. Skye’s hands are on her skin and in her hair and that’s a miracle she still can’t stop marveling at…

Even three months down the road, Skye still looks at her with stars in her eyes.

May wants to give her every one.

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**Skye:**

April rolls around, and May comes down from a meeting in Coulson’s office looking soberer than Skye has seen her in a long time. She doesn’t need to say anything to call her to follow—one look and Skye abandons her laptop on the common room table and follows May to their room.

She doesn’t cushion the blow at all once their door closes behind her.

“We’re bringing Ward in tomorrow.”

May patiently explains the reasons, the plan, the timeline, but Skye can barely hear her over the roaring in her ears. She wants to argue, but she can’t speak around the persistent nausea rising up in her throat. She’s not surprised that May can tell what she’s feeling anyway, though, because before she realizes what is happening, May has lowered her by the shoulders to sit on the foot of the bed.

“Breathe, Skye,” May orders quietly, pressing her hands into Skye’s knees, a grounding pressure. “I know you’re upset but you need to stay in control right now. Breathe…”

Skye closes her eyes and pulls on all the techniques May has been drilling with her at 5 every morning—how to inventory everything that she’s feeling (or ignoring) and distil it down to its core, where she can decide what to do with it.

“That’s it,” May murmurs behind Skye’s closed eyes, the pressure of her hands relaxing slightly. “You can do this—just focus…”

_Bring it in, smooth it out, get to know it…_

“You won’t have to see him at all,” she hears her S.O. saying, and Skye looks up, trying to focus on May, burning through the darkness. May’s eyes and voice are stern as she gazes down at Skye. “We’re putting him in a basement cell here, and no one except Coulson will be speaking to him. Someone will make sure he eats and doesn’t try to kill himself again, but that’s only because we need intel from him.”

“Kill himself _again_?” Skye repeats, unable get over that phrase. “What did he—“

“Like I said,” May says quietly, cupping Skye’s cheeks in her hands and holding her gaze captive, “we’re bringing him here because he’s a source we can use. It’s the only reason he’s still alive at all.”

Skye doesn’t know how to respond to that, and closes her eyes, trying to smooth everything down inside her.

_Not just why we didn’t kill him back in New Mexico…but why they saved his life even if he doesn’t_
“How many times did he try to die?” she asks. It shouldn’t matter. She doesn’t want to care. But now, this is just one more thing the two of them have in common.

May’s hands fall away from her face. “Three times.”

Skye wants to throw up, but she swallows and opens her eyes, glaring up at May.

“You can’t tell Fitz or Simmons,” she says severely, as though she were in any sort of position to order May to do anything. But May seems unsurprised by this admonition and only nods.

“I agree. And so does Coulson. Neither of us wants him here anymore than you all do. But if having him here gives us any kind of an edge over Hydra, then it’s a step we need to be willing to take.”

Skye nods, reaching for May again and pulling her closer until she can wrap her arms around May’s waist, pressing her ear into her stomach. May’s hands rest gently on the back of her head, slide down to wrap around her shoulders…

“Thank you for telling me,” Skye says quietly.

“I’m sorry,” May responds in a whisper.

May:

“Why is it different?”

They’re both standing on a dropcloth laid out on the floor of his office, and she’s cleaning and bandaging a cut on his hand from a stray flick of the knife. The wall behind him is covered from top to bottom with incomprehensible symbols—lines and circles and diamonds and dashes filling every inch of space available. He looks more peaceful than he did before he began carving, but she can see the worry working its way through him—the unknown ending looming dark and large ahead of them.

“Why is what different?” May asks, glancing up for clarification.

“With her. With Skye. Why is it different?” He won’t meet her eyes, staring down at the hand that she’s cradling between them.

She doesn’t let go.

“Do you mean, why couldn’t you fix me?” she asks gently, staring at him until he raises his head, looking insulted.

“Give me a little credit, Mel. I never thought you needed to be fixed. I knew you were hurt, far deeper than anyone else realized, and you needed to heal. I just wish I understood how the worst year of our lives did you more good than five years away from all this.”

She thinks of those dark years following Bahrain, of the time he spent with her “sifting through the ashes.” He had been persistent, but always gentle. He never forced her to do something that she wasn’t ready to do, including getting on the bus with him. Her future self had been right—she had been ready to be back in the field by then, and he had been the one to give her the chance.

“You did everything right, Phil.” If he needs to hear that, she is willing to say it. “You were the best
of friends in that time, and far better to me than I deserved.”

He seems a tiny bit insulted by this response too. “I wasn’t looking for a pat on the head, May,” he mutters, glancing up.

She stares at him and thinks of those dark months following Bahrain when she had time-travelled like a ball in a pinball machine, thrown this way and that without any control. She had been an emotional mess for weeks in addition to still healing physically, to the point that Andrew had been afraid to leave her alone in the house. Phil had come over some days to keep her company while Andrew went out to run errands—there was literally nothing any of them could do to make things better or easier in those weeks. But she never forgot how they never stopped trying to be there in case that were to change.

“I think Andrew would want to know the same thing,” she begins, picking her words carefully. It’s actually a question she’s thought about before, but she wants to tell him in the gentlest way possible. “I think the difference is that I knew both of you before the whole mess began. And even though I would never have said so, I think that I was always afraid that you were just waiting for the person you used to know to come back…and I wasn’t sure that that was even possible.”

“I didn’t—” Phil starts to say, then cuts himself off, glancing away. Whether from guilt or shame, she’s not sure, but she squeezes his hand gently to bring his attention back to her.

“But then she showed up,” she goes on, remembering the hacker with a bag over her head being marched onto the plane, bringing life-changing gravity with her, “and for the first time, someone was telling me they loved the person I would be, not the person I used to be. For the first time, there was hope instead of fear.”

Phil is gazing at her with a look of tenderness that somehow doesn’t feel inappropriate, the same look she imagines she has given younger versions of Skye on some occasions by now—love, pity, and pain all combining into an unnameable look that manages to be both happy and sad.

“It’s one of the less awful conventions of time travel,” May adds, trying to lighten the mood a little as she finishes tying the bandage on his hand. “Knowing sometimes that things will get better…or at least that you’ll make it through them.”

“Do you know anything about this?” he says quietly, nodding towards the wall behind them.

May swallows and steps away, going over to the camera where she recorded his carving session and turning it off.

“Not yet,” she whispers, extracting the memory card and setting it on his desk. “But hopefully soon.”

“Still no signs of anything like this from Skye?” he asks, eyes searching hers concernedly.

May shakes her head, the relief heavy in her chest. “Unless she’s got a wall somewhere too that she’s hiding from all of us, no. Still nothing.”

He nods, turning away from her and looking up again at the wall of incomprehensible symbols stretching above them. “Let’s hope it stays that way.”

She’s unsurprised that Skye is still awake when she slips into their room a little while later, the plaster scrubbed off her hands and dust brushed off her clothes.

“Hey,” Skye whispers, setting aside her phone and sitting up halfway as May perches on the bed and unlaces her shoes. “Late night.”
May nods wordlessly and tosses her shoes over beside the wall, changing into a clean t-shirt before she pulls back the covers and climbs in beside Skye. The girl reaches for her hand in the dark, and May shifts down until her temple bumps Skye’s shoulder.

“You okay?” Skye asks, now able to discern small differences in May’s silence, still holding out everything she has in a shameless offering.

In the darkness, May purses her lips and shakes her head.

_I don’t know what’s happening. I have no idea how to fix this._

“Can you talk about it?” Skye asks quietly.

Again, May shakes her head.

“Come here then,” Skye whispers, and May rolls willingly against her body until they’re nearly lying on top of each other and her ear is resting over Skye’s heart, a steady beat that drowns everything else out. Gentle fingers drag through her hair, soothing and smoothing, both soft and grounding.

“I love you,” Skye whispers beneath her, barely a breath in the darkness.

May presses a kiss to the heart beneath her cheek and hopes that Skye will let that be enough.

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**Skye:**

There was one other aspect of being a time traveler’s significant other that Skye had never thought through before, but thankfully, it took nearly a few months for this particular situation to transpire.

Skye wakes up one night pressed against May’s side, _burning up_ and a little disoriented because she could have sworn May was on her other side when they fell asleep… Shifting carefully away, she puts a little space between their bodies, which is an immediate relief and doesn’t seem to wake May at all. But as Skye rolls over onto her other side on what should have been an empty stretch of mattress, she bumps again into May.

_How…_

Forcing herself to stay still, Skye reaches carefully over and touches May’s arm. Then, she reaches behind her, stretching out until her fingertips just barely touch another warm body.

_Wait…_

Skye sits up sharply, clutching the blanket against her skin and stifling a shriek.

“What the hell?!” she yelps, scrambling to the end of the bed and leaping out, heart hammering in her chest as she spins back towards the sound of two separate people shifting around on the mattress. Skye hits the switch for the overhead light beside the door, wondering exactly who would dare to climb in bed with them…

But it’s not a sneak, she realizes as painful light floods the room and she can clearly see the two people flinching away from the brightness. On one side of the mattress is May, and on the other side of the mattress…is May.

“Oh my god,” Skye breathes, pressing a hand to her chest in relief. The panic morphs quickly into laughter, a disbelieving wheeze spilling out in with her breath. “Oh my god…”
“Jiejie…” one of the women groans, rolling over on her side and tucking her head under one arm to block the light, “would you please make your girlfriend calm down and get back in bed?”

But the other Melinda just mumbles, yanking the covers back over her body and turning on her own side, away from Skye. She isn’t wearing anything, and Skye guesses this means she’s the visitor in this scene. “I already did this, Meimei,” the woman grumbles, mirroring the first May’s movement and rolling away, tucking her arm up over her eyes. “You’re up…”

The first Melinda, which Skye assumes is the one she actually went to sleep with last night, sighs and reaches one hand blindly out towards Skye.

“Come on, Skye,” she mumbles, “turn the light out and come back to bed. I’ll sleep in the middle if you don’t want to sleep next to her.”

But Skye is still laughing even as she flips off the light again and stumbles back towards the bed, falling willingly in the middle of the mattress again between the two women and pulling the comforter back up over the three of them.

No wonder it was so warm under here…

As she settles back down beside (Present-day?) May and, now cool enough again, tucks in against her back, her giggles resurge, muffled into her pillow.

“I feel like I should be taking advantage of this opportunity,” she murmurs, trailing a suggestive hand down May’s side to rest over her hip. “After all, how often does a girl find herself in bed with two women that she loves?”

But neither woman takes the bait.

“Go to sleep…” the May behind her grumbles, and Skye rolls over to press a kiss against the bare shoulder of the woman behind her.

“I’m always happy to see you,” she whispers as she brushes the woman’s hair off her neck and presses another soft kiss there. She rolls onto her back and reaches carefully out until she’s barely touching them both, their bookending presence a double comfort. “Anytime.”

May:

“No, not like that—keep doing it like that and you’re going to break your foot.”


“Listen, sister, I didn’t volunteer to help you so you could be such a smart-ass,” May cuts her off, rolling her eyes. “I couldn’t care less that you just passed your field medicine certification and can now name all the bones in the human body.”

She moves in beside the younger girl and demonstrates the move again. “Plant, squat, spin, jump, kick, and land on the ball of your foot, not your heel, not the outside of your foot. Ball.”

“I did that,” the girl snaps petulantly, hanging one hand from her hip as she narrows a glare at May.

May mirrors the move, staring down her younger self. “Who’s got the better perspective here, Meimei?” she says. “You want to get that mid-shaft fracture, you keep doing it the way you’re doing it. But foot injuries are a pain in the ass and I’m trying to spare you—so listen to me and do it like I
showed you.”

Her younger self rolls her eyes and steps back into position, and May sets her own stance and raises the handheld target out in front of her again. They have the gym all to themselves—it’s Christmas break already (the last one her class will get before they become agents), but Melinda is dragging her feet leaving campus because she’d rather hang out in an empty building than suffer more days than she must in her mom’s house in Philadelphia. It’s not that she doesn’t want to see her—it’s just that they haven’t gotten any better at communicating since Melinda left home, and ten days is asking quite a lot. Phil had her invited her to his mother’s home for the holiday, but she hadn’t wanted to give him the wrong idea and had said no as gently as she could.

When she’d appeared in the dorm room with her younger self, May could easily see that this Melinda had some restless energy to work out, and May had offered to go down to the gym with her to help her work on her jump-kicks.

It’s not so different from what she’s been doing with Skye for the past few months.

And she never noticed before how much Skye and her younger self had in common.

“Plant, squat, spin, jump, kick, and land on the ball,” she repeats as the girl sets her stance.

Meimei pulls off the jump and hits the target but misses the landing again.

“You can’t think of it as a toe loop,” May corrects, trying to think of a better way to explain it. “Think of it more like a Salchow—in the take-off, anyway. But you’re still landing like you think there’s a skate down there. No outside edge landing, or you’ll break your foot like I said.”

“Have you even put on a pair of skates in the last decade?” the younger Melinda mutters, setting her stance and then attempting the jump reverse-hook again. She does a better landing this time, and May smiles for more than one reason.

“You’d be surprised,” May says with a smile, thinking of a crowded ice rink in London on Christmas Eve.

Meimei raises an eyebrow but says nothing, just attempts the kick again.

A little while later, they’re going through a few moves in a relaxed sparring match, and May is genuinely surprised by how much of her younger self’s moves she can anticipate. It’s not the first time she’s sparred with herself, but it’s been awhile since the last time.

“You going to tell me how old you are?” Meimei asks at one point, dodging a relaxed jab from May and coming back with an elbow to May’s thigh.

“Hmm?” May mutters, absorbing the blow and knocking Meimei off balance with a combination move that she knows that her younger self hasn’t learned yet. This is as autopilot as she can be in a fight—while easily predicting how Meimei will attack or react, May is half in the match and half in memories of London and all the good things since then.

But then Meimei surprises her with a take-down that May had forgotten, a move she doesn’t use anymore because it requires rebounding into a round-off/handspring or landing planked on her back, and those are two things she’s about fifteen years past doing without breaking something. She also hasn’t been on the receiving end of that kick in a long time, and the double impact of Meimei’s feet on her ribs, followed by her back striking the floor, knock the air out of her lungs and leave her a little discombobulated as she stares up at the gym ceiling.
“Okay, but really, what is with you?” Meimei says, closing the distance between them and standing over her, crossing her arms. “You’re acting…different than the last time for sure, but different than usual.”

“What are you talking about?” May groans, rubbing her ribs and catching her breath.

“And don’t think I didn’t see your hickeys when you were getting dressed,” Meimei adds, folding her arms and gazing down at May knowingly. “Are they from the person who’s got you all distracted right now?”

May feels a flush creep up her skin, but she only grins smugly as she climbs to her feet. “Be jealous,” she teases her younger self. “She’s hot.”

This visibly disarms the younger girl for a moment, and May thinks back, remembering how confused this statement had made her for a few months following.

“Don’t overthink it, Meimei,” May says, draping her arm over the girl’s shoulders and steering her back towards the locker room. “You’ll figure it out soon enough. We love the people we love. It’s as simple and as complicated as that.”

Meimei says nothing, clearly ignoring May’s advice and overthinking it anyway, but just as they near the swinging gym doors, someone pushes through from the other side, and the two of them stop short, horrified as they make eye contact with a very confused young man holding the strap of the duffel over his shoulder and staring at the two of them.

May is the one who gets her words working first.

“Oh, hey Phil,” May exhales, a smile breaking out over her face as she takes in the sight of her oldest friend with a full head of hair and minus the wrinkles and tie. “I forgot this was today.”

Skye:

Jemma left this morning.

They had both cried when May snuck her out to the garage as Jemma left so that Skye could say goodbye. Simmons hadn’t said where she was going, she hadn’t said why she was leaving, but the fact that May seemed less worried than Skye makes her think that she’s going on some kind of mission for SHIELD. Something that May was allowed to know about but Skye wasn’t.

One of many things nowadays, it seems.

Skye has been shamelessly sulking for most of the day, sad more than anything else. Even if she hasn’t spent as much time with her in the past five months as she had in the first four, Skye can already feel the space Jemma has left behind. She doesn’t know if Fitz knows yet. She wonders who’s going to be the one to tell him if he doesn’t.

They’ve all seen the slow drift that has separated the two over the past few months. Once Fitz was mobile and capable of caring for himself again, he had wanted to resume helping in the lab, but his tremors and lagging motor and communication skills had quickly isolated him from the other scientists. He’s been improving at a slower pace since then, but Jemma had by then had too many other duties to slow down with him. He seems calm enough when he’s alone, and Skye has tried to let him be where he needs to be to feel okay.

But now Simmons is gone too, and Skye is very aware of how much she misses her friends.
She’s sprawled on their bed that night after a long day of training where she could tell May was doing her best to keep Skye’s mind occupied on new tasks and off Simmons absence. Worn out now, Skye has her laptop on her chest and is scrolling through her files from Coulson, trying to come up with a program to analyze the pictures of the strange symbols he’s been sending her. She can’t tell what they’re supposed to be, and she can’t find regular patterns even after hours of staring and comparing on her own. She’s doing to have to write her own program, though, and that’s going to call for more energy than she has at the moment…

When May comes in, she doesn’t say anything as she sheds her shoes and jeans. When she sits down at the foot of the bed and wordlessly pulls Skye’s bare feet onto her lap and starts massaging them, Skye keeps her laptop open on her chest but very quickly becomes unable to focus. She knows how good May’s hands are at plenty of other things, but this is a first, and she’s not minding it at all as May presses out the tension that Skye is sure has knotted itself deep in her muscles by now. Eventually, she closes the laptop and looks up at May, who is watching her carefully.

“You okay?” her S.O. asks quietly, her dark eyes concerned, and Skye closes her eyes and sighs.

“I wish things would stop changing,” she answers heavily. “Every time we get used to one thing, something else comes in and messes everything up, and we all have to adjust again.”

“Well, I knew you weren’t a fan of some of the new teammates, but they might come around…” May responds with a teasing smile, but her eyes show that she knows exactly what Skye means. After a few minutes, she sets Skye’s feet back on the bed and climbs fully up on the mattress, lying down beside her.

“I feel that way too, sometimes,” May murmurs, taking one of Skye’s hands in hers and drawing gentle lines across her palm, mapping the creases with light drags of her fingernails. “But then I have to remind myself that if things weren’t changing, we’d be in bigger trouble. It would mean we were no closer to beating Hydra than we were on January first.”

“I know, and I get that,” Skye says, opening her eyes to set the laptop on the nightstand and then rolling over on her side so that she’s facing May. "It's just…this is the family that you used to tell me about when I was little…I know this is it…and it just keeps changing. People arrive, people leave, people die, people are traitorous dirtbags who get locked up in our basement, people get promotions and things change, people get sent on missions and disappear for awhile…”

She catches how May looks away there…

“I understand why it needs to happen,” Skye says quickly. “It just doesn’t make it any easier.”

May nods, reaching over to smooth her fingertips over Skye’s cheek.

“I’m not going anywhere,” she says solemnly, holding Skye’s gaze. And Skye nods because she recognizes that this is all that May can do here. She can’t make things stop changing, she can’t make this hurt less, but she can stay as long as she is able.

For once, May is the one staying while everyone else around her moves.

Skye buries herself in May's arms and drowns in her gravity.

May:

The hardest moment comes on another night, when the two of them are pressed together with sweat drying on their skin and their heartbeats finally slowing down as they breathe against one another.
Skye is wrapped in May's arms, covering her neck and chest with lazy kisses, when May suddenly remembers something that had crossed her mind earlier that day. Reaching over with one hand, she gropes for the folded piece of paper that they keep tucked under the mattress, unfolding it behind Skye’s head and studying the List.

“What are you looking at?” Skye asks from her place under May’s chin, seeming unsurprised when she glances back and sees the List.

“I was just wondering how many visits were left,” May says, lifting her arm off Skye’s back as she rolls onto her back. Skye lies down against her side, cheek still resting on her chest.

“Still plenty to go, she says,” looking up at it with May. About half the dates on the paper now have a corresponding date next to them, visits completed, memories the two of them both have now.

“Yeah,” May agrees, but she can’t stop herself from saying what she has been thinking about all week. “But at this rate, I’ll have them all finished in the next year or two.”

The quiet that descends on them after those words feels crushing.

*Why the hell did you say that out loud, Melinda? Why…*

“Maybe the visits will slow down,” she says quickly, trying to offer another explanation before Skye leaps to the worst conclusion. “I mean, I’ve got at least a dozen more to go, and these are just the dates on the List…”

“You think you might have visited me other days that aren’t on the list?” Skye says, seeming excited by that idea. “Like, when I was really little?”

“That would be funny, wouldn’t it?” May agrees, folding the paper up again and sticking it back under the mattress. “What if the visit in 1994 was just the first visit that you remember?”

She feels Skye’s mouth pull into a smile against her skin, but after a few quiet moments, the inevitable question is whispered.

“May…what’s the oldest you’ve ever seen your time-traveling self?”

Sighing heavily, May picks her words carefully. “They don’t always tell me their ages. Injuries and gray hairs are usually all I have to judge by. But those who did? 46.”

Skye is quiet for a long moment before her next question. “Have you ever seen yourself as an old woman?”

May hesitates but then answers softly, “No.”

It’s not a fact that has escaped her. Just one she’s chosen not to dwell on.

“Why do you think that might be?” Skye whispers, suddenly sounding again very, very young.

May sighs, staring up at the ceiling as she answers. “I don’t know, Skye. Maybe I found some way to stay in the present, some way to make the traveling stop. That’s what I would like to believe.”

In her younger years, she was reassured by the sight of her older selves, confirmations of a certain future. Without that to go on, it’s hard to guess what could possibly lie ahead.

Skye doesn’t say anything else for the rest of the night. And she doesn’t let go of May either.
Skye:

“I really wasn’t expecting to have to lecture the two of you about this,” Coulson is saying as a summer sunset scorches the sky outside his office windows orange and pink, “but I suppose it was only a matter of time before something like this happened.”

She and May are standing on one side of his desk while he sits on the other. For all intents and purposes, they’re being conferenced by their Director, which is a serious thing. But it’s kind of hard to act serious when she’s blushing as hard as she is.

“I don’t think I need to tell either of you that the unavoidable overlap of personal and professional brings its own set of challenges, and that the Base may be our home but it is also our workspace. And this—” Coulson gestures to the mess of flour and water caking his head, shoulders, and chest ”—is the definition of unprofessional.”

Skye is attempting to look remorseful and apologetic, but the laughter is fizzing over in her chest, and May elbows her. Skye can’t risk a glance at her, though, since it will just make her laugh harder.

“I’m not angry,” Coulson goes on calmly, pulling a gym towel out of one of his desk drawers and dragging it over his face, managing to remove some of the doughy mess. “Honestly, seeing the two of you happy is one of the only things brightening my day at this point—but I am your Director, and I’m running out of clothes.”

“I’ll pay your dry-cleaning bill,” Skye blurts out, trying not to let herself laugh any more. “And I’ll get you a new one to make up for it. Although of course you sign my payroll check so you know exactly how fancy I can afford…”

“Just don’t let it happen again,” Coulson cuts her off, standing to shrug off his ruined suit jacket. “Keep the pranks away from your teammates—it’s hard enough to recruit people without them getting scared off by the possibility of being made into a walking lump of bread dough.”

“I won’t let it happen again,” May says quickly, obviously doubtful that Skye can say anything to make this better rather than worse. “She’s still a rookie, but I’m the one who challenged her. I’m sorry you got caught in the crossfire.”

Coulson raises a (flour-dusted) eyebrow at May as he hangs his jacket over the back of his desk chair and starts to loosen his tie.

“Who’s winning the prank war at the moment?” he asks, a knowing look in his eye.

Skye opens her mouth, but May beats her to it.

“Who do you think?” the woman responds dryly, and Coulson almost smiles as he pulls off his tie with a puff of white dust.

“You two get out of here and go disable anything else you’ve set up that an innocent third party could walk into,” he orders, and Skye immediately turns to go, relieved. “If I find one more bucket wedged on top of a door, I’m dumping it in your bed,” he calls after them.

Skye manages not to laugh until they shut the door and get down the hall and around the corner. Once they’re out of earshot, though, she stops short, leaning against the wall and doubling over.

“Oh my god…” she wheezes, clutching at her abs and trying not to let her laughter grow too loud. “Oh my god, I can’t believe…”
“For someone who could access all the security cameras in the base if she wanted to,” May mutters, not laughing but definitely smiling, “you did a terrible job setting that prank. I was in the hangar. Have been in the hangar all damn day…”

“I know I know,” Skye says defensively, “I thought you’d be coming in for dinner soon…”

“You’ve gotta pick a spot that’s isolated from the rest of the team. Our room, sure—the common room door, not so much.”

“Hey, I didn’t want to ruin our carpet,” Skye says, straightening up and eyeing May. “Give me a little credit for thinking of that.”

“Still, that was a bit of a step down from your previous attempt,” May says, folding her arms and smiling. “I thought you’d keep playing to your strengths.”

“I didn’t have the heart to embarrass you in front of the new teammates,” Skye says, thinking of her previous prank where she had disabled the ‘silent’ function, programmed May’s phone to change ringtones every time one had been used, filled her phone with recordings of various cartoon theme songs and famous youtube lines, and then set up a program on her laptop to “call” May’s phone every thirty seconds until she cracked.

“Are you sure you want to keep this going?” May challenges, narrowing her eyes playfully. “I could make you a paranoid freak by the end of the day if I really tried.”

“I’ll never be scared of you,” Skye says with a grin, grabbing May quickly by her belt loops and pulling her into a kiss. She manages to get her arms around May’s waist even as the woman tries to pull out of the kiss.

“Skye, we’re still in a hallway,” May mutters as Skye drops a kiss down her neck to the v-neck of her t-shirt. “Skye—“

They break apart suddenly though at the sound of a scream from the direction of the stairs down to the kitchen, followed by the unmistakable sound of a dish shattering on the concrete floor.

“What the—” May mutters, but Skye already knows.

“Uhm, someone might have just discovered the fake spider that I hid in the tea tin,” she admits sheepishly, glancing away.

“Skye…” May sighs, reaching up and tugging gently on two handfuls of Skye’s hair. “I’m not the only one here who drinks that tea…”

Attempting to defend her pride, Skye just shrugs. “Oldie but a goodie,” she says with a smile.

May finally laughs then, looking a little helpless but also impressed. “I love you,” she mutters, shaking her head with a smile, “but you need to go down and apologize to whoever that was too, now.”

But Skye didn’t hear anything after the first three words. Her mind is still trying to catch up, process, absorb…

“You…what?”

May raises her head, her expression surprised but not exactly regretful, and Skye keeps trying to stammer her own words out.
“You—you’ve never said it before…” she whispers, amazed and disbelieving. “Not when I was little, or older, or since I met you…”

Not once. Not on any visit that she remembers, not in any circumstance in the present. Skye has been aware of how many times she has said those words to May only for them to be responded to with silence or gentle deflection, but she stopped waiting for May to say them back a long time ago.

But now, apparently, the wait is over for this, too.

May’s brow furrows, but then she smiles. “I think I know why I did that. Why I’ll do that,” she says, stepping closer and slipping her arms around Skye’s ribs, pulling her in closer. “I think I wanted the first time I said it to be the first time you heard it. So that we could actually have something that happened at the same time for both of us.”

“Say it again,” Skye demands, moving her hands from May’s back to her face, cupping her cheeks and staring into her eyes.

May doesn’t look away. “I love you so much,” she says without fear or hesitation, and Skye’s heart is so full that it could nearly burst.

It’s truly the best of times.

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May:

“He says he’ll only talk to Skye.”

It’s been four months since they brought Ward in, and he has yet to say anything other than this to Coulson. He hasn’t attempted suicide again; he’s been waking up daily to exercise in his cell; he’s been eating a satisfactory amount.

But he won’t talk, and that’s all they brought him here for.

“You know why he says that,” May mutters, watching the monitor with Coulson. Ward appears to be sleeping on his cot, but she doubts that’s the case. His mind must be as calculating as ever—he has to be plotting something.

“He probably thinks she’d be easiest to manipulate or convince of something other than the truth,” Coulson says, nodding gravely.

“He probably thinks she still has feelings for him,” May corrects, and Coulson looks over, surprised.

“I know he felt something for her, but was it mutual?”

May shakes her head. “Skye says it wasn't. But he might have been convinced.”

“You could prepare her…” Coulson says slowly. “We’re going to need something important from him sooner or later. Her being willing to go down there…”

May doesn’t let herself say anything, but she wants to protest immediately.

No. He doesn’t deserve one more shot at whatever he wants.

She heard the things he said to Skye right before she threw him through a wall and nailed him to the floor…
“She’s a good agent, May,” Coulson reminds her quietly. “She’ll do what she has to.”

“I don’t want her to have to.”

She watches the monitors a moment longer and makes her decision.

“Let me go down there first.”

Coulson looks over at her with a concerned expression.

“What will you say to him?”

“I don’t know. But I want to see what he says to me.”

She waits until the middle of the night, when she leaves Skye sleeping in their bed to slip out of the room and down to the sub-level cell where they put Ward when he arrived a few months ago.

Coulson has already shown her how to work the control tablet.

Ward is stretched out on the cot with his back to the barrier when she touches the control to remove the opacity, but the speed at which he rolls over tells her that he either wasn’t asleep or is still as wired as any Specialist is trained to be.

He seems surprised to see her sitting calmly in the chair on the other side, and the length of the silence before he speaks tells her that he wasn’t expecting to see her at all—he has no words prepared.

“May.”

He sits up on the bed and plants his feet on the floor but doesn’t stand, staring at her in the dim light with his same dark, calculating gaze. He’s grown facial hair several months thick, but behind the beard, his skin is paler than she’s ever seen it. Still, she can see the definition in his arms and the tension in his posture—

He’s been living like he won’t be in there forever.

She says nothing, just stares silently through the space between them, her arms folded defensively across her chest as she waits.

Surely he remembers that she can outlast anyone for uncomfortable silences…

“What are you doing here?” he finally asks, still not moving from the cot. “Did my good behavior finally earn conjugal visit rights?”

If she had less self-control, she’d roll her eyes. This time, all she does is intensify her glare.

“I told Coulson that I’d tell him whatever he wanted to know if he’d let me talk to Skye,” Ward says then, finally standing and approaching the barrier between them on bare feet. She can see the scars where she put nails through one of them. “Sorry, but you’re not quite the same.”

He stops just beyond the force-field wall, close enough that the grid hums a little louder but not close enough to light it up with a warning glare. His dark eyes crawl over her in a way that she knows is meant to unsettle. It’s almost working.

“You look different,” he says quietly, but he doesn’t elaborate.
She finally lets herself speak.

“Last time you saw me, I wanted to kill you,” she says in her old humorless tone. “That hasn’t changed.”

But he only smirks subtly in response. “Still sore that you didn’t see it coming?”

Behind her elbow, one hand slowly curls into a fist.

*This is the man who lied, day in and day out, to you and Coulson and your team.*

*This is the man who killed Victoria.*

*Who threw Fitz and Simmons into the ocean.*

*Who worked for the man who ordered Skye shot.*

*Who threatened to…*

“Tell me why,” she says calmly. It’s all she cares to hear.

“Why did I do it?” he repeats, still standing stock-still only inches away from her.

“Why do you want to talk to Skye?”

She knows exactly why. She just wants to see if he’ll admit it.

But he only narrows his eyes at her, a knowing smile creeping across his lips.

“You know, May,” he says, turning casually and shuffling leisurely back towards his cot, “it is pretty late. Or at least, I think it is…Kind of hard to tell when you’re in a windowless cell.” He sits back down on the cot and lies down slowly. “So unless you’re planning on climbing in here with me, I think I’ve had enough conversation for one night.”

He stretches out on his back, tucking his hands behind his head, and May reaches for the tablet resting on her knees. His final words, though, make her freeze.

“Nice to know you’ve moved on,” Ward says towards the ceiling, his eyes already closed. “Hope you two are very happy together.”

May hesitates, disgust, fear, and anger filling her to her fingertips. It takes every ounce of self-control to not leap to her feet and burst through the barrier and beat him senseless until he’s too broken to stay in their base anymore…

But rational thoughts scream over her fury, dousing the rage and calming her fear.

*He can’t know. He couldn’t possibly know. He’s just yanking your chain…*

She touches the tablet screen to shade the barrier and leaves without another word.

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**Skye:**

“That’s too much.”

“You promised not to micromanage.”
“It’s my hair, and I’m telling you that’s too much.”

“What happened to trying to help me be calm? You told me to make sure I got all the split ends off, and your nagging is just stressing me out. I’m the one wielding blades around your ears.”

“I don’t want it that short in the front—it’s just harder to keep out of my eyes.”

“Funny, since you never seem to tie your hair back unless we’re training. How do you even fight with all that hair in your face?”

From the chair in front of her, May gives her a challenging look that is far less effective when she’s two feet shorter than usual.

“Bobby pins, May,” Skye teases, dragging a comb gently over May’s damp hair and snipping a little more off the ends. “Bobby pins are totally a thing. You’ll live longer.”

They’re in the community bathroom on their hall, May is seated in a folding chair in front of one of the mirrors, and Skye is carefully giving her her first haircut since before she agreed to drive the Bus for their team last year. It was a “birthday present,” along with a new pair of aviator sunglasses (for whenever Coulson finally lets her fly again), that Skye had surprised her with this morning despite May’s insistence that Skye didn’t need to get her anything. And as bad as May knows her hair is, she still had only agreed to be at Skye’s mercy after Skye had promised that May could cut her hair immediately after (an equal opportunity for revenge if Skye did something ridiculous to her hair).

Skye studies her handiwork in the front, moves around to check the back again and make sure everything is even, then moves around to May’s front and checks her work one more time, combing her fingers gently through the woman’s hair.

“K, I think I’m done,” she announces, setting the scissors on the sink and carefully removing the towel from around May’s shoulders and shaking the hair on it into a trashcan. “What do you think?”

May stands, and Skye crouches to sweep up the hair on the floor with a handheld broom and dustpan while May leans closer to the mirror, combing her hair out with her fingers.

“Shorter than it’s been in awhile,” May mutters, “but I can get used to it.”

“High praise,” Skye says dryly, dumping the dustpan of hair into the trash and tossing the pan back on the floor. She steps up behind May and wraps her arms around her waist, tucking her chin over May’s shoulder and looking in the mirror with her.

“You look fresher, for sure,” Skye teases. “Maybe even younger.”

May smiles but still reaches back and gently pinches the ticklish spot on Skye’s side with frustrating accuracy. “Careful, Skye,” she says, turning and smirking up at Skye before dropping a quick kiss on her lips. “I’m wielding the scissors next.”

Skye wets down her hair and they switch places with May tucking the towel over Skye’s shoulders as she sits down on the chair in front of the mirror.

“Take off as much as you think needs to come off,” Skye says as May picks up the scissors. “It’s been over a year since my last cut, too.”

Skye doesn’t pay much attention to the hair falling to the floor at her feet for the next few minutes—May’s hands in her hair will always be one of her favorite things, and Skye is so relaxed that she nearly falls asleep as May works slowly and steadily behind her. By the time she shifts around to the
front, though, Skye has come up with another idea.

“Hold on,” she says suddenly, and May freezes, obviously startled. “Let me see the scissors for a minute.”

May offers them handles first, and Skye reaches up to pull a forelock from her hairline and bring it down over her face, just over her eyebrows.

“Skye—” May starts to say.

But Skye is faster and snips the lock short before she can change her mind. May looks surprised, and Skye grins as she offers her the scissors again.

“Give me bangs,” she orders. “Make everything in the front that short.”

“What have you done…” May mutters, but Skye can tell she’s not upset. “There’s no way I’ll be able to cut everything in a straight line.”

“I trust you, May,” Skye says, catching the woman’s eye. “Don’t be afraid.”

Something about May’s eyes says that those words don’t make much of a difference.

Skye’s a little less relaxed this time with May leaning over her as she works with steady hands and a careful gaze to carefully cut long bangs into Skye’s hair. The falling hair tickles her nose, and May is going so slowly that Skye eventually starts fidgeting on the chair.

“Stop moving,” May mutters, pausing in her work to give Skye a stern look.

“You’re taking too long,” Skye says, shifting on the folding chair again.

“This was your idea.”

Skye forces herself to be still again. “I know…”

This time, she lasts barely a minute before starting to fidget again.

“Skye, stop—” May suddenly moves and steps over her legs, sitting down straddling Skye’s lap—moving.”

Well then.

Skye is surprised, but May has a knowing look in her eye, and that makes Skye bold. She manages to stop fidgeting, but she can’t help bringing her hands up to rest on May’s thighs, dragging slowly up and down while May works. May stays focused on her task, carefully combing and cutting Skye’s fringe until an even shelf of hair hangs over her forehead, but Skye has a feeling that she’s deliberately sitting as still as she is. Skye’s fingers stray towards May’s waistband only once, until a firm “Don’t you dare,” makes her lower her hands back to more innocent places.

Finally, May leans back, inspecting her work.

“Done?” Skye prompts, raising her eyebrows.

May looks her over a final time before nodding. “Done.”

“Good,” Skye mutters and grabs May’s t-shirt, dragging her into a kiss.
May makes a startled sound but kisses her back readily enough, and Skye finally lets go to find May carefully holding the scissors away from both of them, as if worried about where they might end up.

“Don’t you want to look at your haircut first?” May finally says a little breathlessly, a satisfying flush in her cheeks. She stands up before Skye can think to grab onto her again and starts to carefully remove the towel from around Skye’s shoulders, stepping away to shake the hair into the trash. Skye stands up and looks in the mirror, smiling at herself.

“Looks good,” she says, flipping her hair over her shoulder to check the length. “Looks healthy.”

“Good,” May says, crouching to sweep up the hair. “Go take the chair back to the common room.”

“And then you’d better be in our room when I get back so that I can make you pay for that little stunt,” Skye says with a wicked grin, and May smirks knowingly from the floor.

“Can’t wait.”

Skye folds up the chair and carries it out of the bathroom, down the barracks hall, around the lab, and back into the common room. Today, she sees a couple of new faces milling around the kitchen—a tough-looking woman with short, dark hair, a tall, lean guy with a dark crew cut, and a smaller guy with a British accent, who is making loud conversation with Mack. She thinks of going over to introduce herself, but she remembers that May will be waiting on her and hurries back into the hallway instead.

They’ll still be around later…

“Skye,” a familiar, hesitant voice says behind her even as she turns down the hall towards the barracks, and she looks over her shoulder to see Fitz, his arms folded around himself, standing on the other side of the hall, just beyond the shadows.

“Fitz,” she says, smiling genuinely, turning completely to face him. “How are you doing today?”

His shoulders are hunched and one of the hands he has tucked under his elbows is visibly twitching. Most of his motor control has gone back to normal by now, but his hands are still a daily fight to get to operate with the same careful dexterity they once did, or just be still when he wants them to.

“You changed your hair,” he says, staring carefully at her and ignoring her question.

In response, Skye smiles.

“Yeah, May just cut it for me,” she says with a grin and a quick turn so that he can see the back. “What do you think?”

Her old friend continues to stare at her solemnly. “You look different.”

The last word sounds more than a little bit sad.

Skye fights the urge to pull him into a hug, but he’s been bad with physical touch ever since his “incident” as they all call it (not an accident—attempted murder, deliberate sacrifice, those aren’t accidents…). Instead, she just smiles sadly back at him.

“I know. Things keep changing, and it sucks, doesn’t it?” The constant turnover has been easy to get used to but no easier to endure. There are three new faces in the kitchen now, but she wonders how long they’ll be around.
Fitz drops his gaze to the floor at her response, and he turns halfway away from Skye as if listening to a voice over his shoulder that only he can hear.

“Yes, I know it looks good on her,” he mutters towards a listener that she can’t see, “I wasn’t implying that it doesn’t, but—”

“Fitz,” Skye cuts him off, and he looks sharply back over at her, as if he’d already forgotten that she was there. The habit of talking to himself has been getting more noticeable lately, and they’ve all agreed that the best thing to do is to keep him anchored in his present surroundings.

“I still miss Jemma too, you know,” Skye says quietly, again arresting the reflex to reach out and squeeze his arm comfortably.

Fitz gazes at her for a long moment and then turns away.

“It’s different for you, though,” he mutters, starting to shuffle down the hall back towards the lab. “You still have May.”

Skye watches him go with a dozen painful memories replaying in her mind about the person he used to be—the team they used to be—and a painful feeling in her chest. She thinks back to their earliest days together, awkward and antagonizing, those first few weeks when he had such a visible crush on her that she’d been embarrassed for him, those months as they finally found their rhythm as a team and he got a clue and they all started moving towards and around one another in different, magnetic ways…

*That’s all gone now. It’s not coming back.*

*But not every change has been bad.*

She makes her way back to her room, trying to lighten the feeling in her chest or come up with some excuse for why she suddenly isn’t quite in the mood for what she wanted five minutes ago. But then she opens her door and sees not one, but two Mays on the bed.

They both look up as she enters. One of them, obviously the visitor, is wrapped in a blanket and curled on her side, looking more than a little worse for wear. The other one, her Present-day May, is sitting curled up on the bed beside her, one hand on the other woman’s shoulder and a stricken look on her face.

The (older?) May looks up at Skye with a sad smile but doesn’t make any movement as Skye steps into the room quickly and shuts the door behind her. “Love the haircut,” the woman says, and there is a tiny catch in her voice that tells Skye that she is in a lot of physical pain.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, crossing quickly to the bed only to have (younger) May’s hand stop her from reaching for the other woman.

“It’s okay, she’s got it,” May says, pressing her gently back, and the other woman looks gratefully up at them.

“Nothing to worry about, D—Skye,” the woman says, exhaling carefully. She has half a dozen small cuts on her face and an exhausted look in her eyes. “Just another day.”

“Do you want me to get you—” Skye starts to say, but the woman waves off her words.

“It’s okay, I won’t be here too much longer,” she says in a tired voice. “Come sit with us.”
Skye obeys without hesitation, kicking off her shoes and climbing up on the bed with the two of them, crowding into the younger woman’s space and looking down at May’s older self. The older woman doesn’t look too different than the woman whose hair she just cut—but there is definitely something different in her eyes. Skye can’t tell if it’s the absence of something she’s used to seeing or the presence of something heavier.

“What’s the date?” the visitor asks, and Skye answers without needing to check her phone.

“September 2, 2014.”

“Our birthday,” the woman says with a smile as her eyes fall shut. Blindly, she reaches out a hand from inside the blanket and brushes May’s knee. “Good times, aren’t they?”

Something about her tone makes a feeling of dread wash over Skye.

“When are you here from?” she asks nervously, but the woman just opens her eyes as she reaches over and catches Skye’s hand in hers.

“It’s good to see you, Skye,” she whispers with a wistful smile, the pain still audible in her voice. She brings her hand up to her face and lays Skye’s palm over her cheek.

“May?” Skye whispers, confused and suddenly, so, so scared...

But then the woman pulls in a sudden breath, there is the familiar sound of air rushing in to fill an empty space, and the blanket wilts, empty, back onto the bed.

A long silence stretches after that, neither May nor Skye moving from their place, looking down at the empty mattress. Finally, May shifts, reaching for the blanket and flipping it back. A large gauze square is revealed, soaked with blood. Skye has no idea what part of her body the other May might have been holding it against.

Her May offers no information, just climbs off the bed and carefully picks up the blood-soaked square, taking it to the trash can and dropping the blanket into the laundry hamper.

“May?” Skye asks quietly. “Do you know what happened?”

It takes a long moment for May to turn back around. When she finally does, there is something in her eyes that Skye recognizes but hasn’t seen for a long time. A nameless expression that she often saw when a Future May would withhold from her something that lay ahead that May knew would be painful—something she didn’t want to be the one to tell her about.

“May?” Skye repeats, reaching out with one hand.

May stares at her for a quiet moment before crossing the space between them, taking Skye’s hand, and climbing back onto the bed. Skye’s eyes dart across May’s face, looking for a clue, waiting for a hint or just a reassurance…and something horrible and cold flows through her as Skye realizes that everything she thought she knew about the future has already happened.

All you knew was that you’d have a family and a home, and you and May would be together.

But what now? What comes next?

May doesn’t answer, though, just smooths one hand over Skye’s cheek, then tips her gently back on the mattress. May’s other hand pulls the hem of Skye’s t-shirt up to her ribs, and the woman leans down to press two gentle kisses right where Skye knows her bullet-wound scars are.
“Can you tell me?” Skye asks in a whisper.

But May just rocks up on one arm and leans up to kiss Skye’s lips. There is a heartbroken look in her eyes when she pulls back.

“I love you,” May whispers, words that Skye has heard often enough by now but that still make her heart flutter. Words that have been murmured and gasped and have sounded like confessions and promises and exclamations.

This is the first time those words have sounded like an apology.

“I love you, too,” Skye whispers back, and anchors herself with a hand in May’s hair, pulling her deeper and trying to lose herself in their union as she has before, but she can’t stop thinking of the few laws of physics that she knows and how if a sun’s gravity was strong enough to pull a comet close enough to embrace it, all it would do is destroy it.

Chapter End Notes

I'm hoping to get a few more chapters knocked out as part of my NaNoWriMo project--
comments make this writer write!
Thanks for sticking with me through this fic--you're all wonderful.
October 1-3, 2014: Skye is 24, May is 45

The mission to get intel from the SHIELD turncoat should have been a straightforward one.

Hartley, Idaho, and Hunter think they’re on their own, which works well for May, Skye, and Trip, hiding in the rafters monitoring the mission. This isn’t their first mission together by a long shot, and it feels almost too easy now that she, May, and Trip have finally settled into the familiarity of a cohesive specialist team, one that rivals the ease at which Idaho, Isabel, and Hunter seem to operate. May and Coulson have been the ones to constantly remind everyone that their newest teammates are mercenaries and in it for the paycheck first and foremost, and that’s all Skye’s team is expecting to monitor today.

One thing none of them planned for was a metahuman.

Hunter will not shut up for the entire ride back to base. Six adults crammed in one SUV is already a recipe for arguments, but he’s nursing a bruise on his ribs and wounded pride and can’t seem to think of any reason to withhold his opinion.

“If you wanted to double-down on agents for this mission, you could have at least been a little more attentive,” he complains, grimacing as he shifts in his seat beside Skye. “Three extra pairs of eyes on the op—you’d think one of you would have noticed the hulk lurking out of our sight and the mark’s.”

“Our job was to monitor you and your performance on the op,” May reminds him calmly from the driver’s seat, still the highest-ranking agent in the car. “You were as unprepared as Browning was.”

“So have the three of you been shadowing our every move since the day we walked into your Base?” Idaho asks from the front seat where he’s riding literal shotgun next to May, eyes attentive on the road around them and a pistol resting on his knee.

“Don’t be silly,” Trip responds dryly from the backseat. “I was put on your case long before you got there.”

“Oh that’s sweet of you,” Hunter intones from the middle seat, directly behind May. “Really makes us feel welcome. You know, united and all that.”

“You think we enjoy not trusting our own team?” Skye snaps beside him as she strips down her pistol and packs it into its case. “We’d cover a lot more ground in one day if we didn’t have to double-up every op.”

“I thought the point was that we weren’t your team,” the Brit responds, raising an eyebrow in her
direction as he settles for wiping his gun down on his damp jeans before tucking it inside his coat, "and that was mostly because you need someone to play the third-party card."

"Hey, think of us more like stepsisters, okay?" Hartley says in Skye’s direction, leaning forward from the backseat where she’s wedged next to Trip. "I was here way before you, short stuff. I know how this house works."

The metaphor hits a little too close to some of Skye’s memories of foster homes in her past life, and she bristles automatically.

"You knew how the old house worked," she says, keeping her eyes fixed straight ahead. "Things change."

Hartley doesn’t seem the least bit intimidated, only leaning back in her seat and shaking her head tiredly. "You don’t need to tell me that."

Skye likes Hartley, she really does—out of all the newest agents to trickle in over the last few months, Hartley has been the friendliest and the most easygoing. Which is a nice contrast to the people who came in with her…

"Did you really think we couldn’t handle ourselves?" Hunter inserts, back at it already. "We can’t maintain a solid cover with agents tailing us."

"And we can’t be sure you won’t make off with the money," Skye responds shortly, managing not to glance down at the case full of cash resting between their bucket seats.

"Again with the trust issues…"

"Coulson knows Hartley, and she’s the only one on your team he trusts," Trip reminds him calmly. "Want to change that, you’re going to have to prove it to him."

"Any idea how that freakshow found us?" Idaho asks from the front as May guides their car effortlessly through the rain-drenched roads to take them back to base.

"The man said we were the highest bidder," Hartley answers. "That means he sent the word out wide."

"And he paid for that mistake," Hunter mutters. "Betting I know what mission the Great and Powerful Oz will be sending us on next."

"That’s your Director, Hunter," Skye snaps, glaring over at him. She’s been trying to master a glower like May’s, but clearly, she’s still got a long way to go.

"That’s the signature on my check, thank you, sweetheart," Hunter responds condescendingly. "I don’t see other agents being treated with this level of disrespect."

Insulting Coulson is the last straw for Skye. She turns sharply in her seat to face him. "Hey, you’re not in any position to negotiate, you absolute—"

"Both of you knock it off."

May’s sharp reprimand from the driver’s seat makes them both shut their mouths, startled, but it’s still Hunter who gets his words working again first.

"Yes, mother," he responds in a sarcastic tone, making Skye narrow her eyes at him even as she
“Shut up, Hunter,” Hartley grumbles from the backseat. “She’s younger than me.”

“Not young enough for this teacher-student relationship to not be at least a little weird, though, wouldn’t you say?” he responds, glancing once between Skye and the driver in front of him. Skye sees May’s hand tighten marginally on the steering wheel, but it’s Trip who jumps to their defense.

“Hey, why don’t you mind your own business, man?” he says, a slight warning in his tone.

“I’m just saying, it doesn’t exactly work out well when couples aren’t on equal ground. I mean, I remember my ex-wife…”

And before Skye realizes what has happened, Hartley has suddenly yanked Hunter back against his seat by a handful of his hair and has a large field knife resting carefully against the skin of his throat.

“I am asking, for once,” Hartley says with measured calm, leaning around the back of Hunter’s seat to speak very clearly in his ear, “that you not be yourself. We need this job as much as they need our help. You blow it by running your mouth and pissing off the leadership, and I will personally slash the tires of every car you drive for the rest of your life. Got it?”

Eyes on the car’s ceiling, Hunter sighs. “Fine, Izzy, I’ll behave,” he groans. “Now put that away before Agent May here decides to drive over some speed bumps just to see how steady your hands are.”

Hartley tips the knife away from his skin, withdrawing her arm and catching Skye’s eye as she leans back in her seat. Her gaze is apologetic, and Skye returns a small smile.

Thanks.

Hartley glances towards Hunter and rolls her eyes.

What can you do?

May gets called into a conference with Coulson as soon as they get back, so Skye is the one to take the metal shards to the lab when they get back to the Playground. Fitz seems to understand her as well as he once did, but Skye glances back over her shoulder as she leaves and sees him standing stock-still staring at the metal shards in his hands, listening to a voice that she doesn’t hear.

There’s still no sign of May as she goes back to their room to change clothes, stripping off her thin body armor (May still won’t let her go out on live-fire ops without something between her and bullets) and changing t-shirts. She takes her work to the Bus, still stalled in the hangar since Fitz hasn’t made any progress on the cloaking technology yet, and stares at the new pages of symbols that Coulson sent her a few days ago. She’s running the symbols through a consolidation program when May finally finds her.

“They weren’t body armor fragments,” she announces as she walks in, surprising Skye enough that she almost loses her balance on the edge of the holocom. “They were flesh. Flesh of a metahuman who can adapt to bullet impacts.”

She holds out a sheet of paper as Skye sets her computer aside and slides off the table to take the proffered sheet, looking down at the profile of a man who snapped the lapsed agent’s neck.

“So he was on the Index?” she says, glancing up at May for confirmation.
She nods gravely. “Slated to be terminated. But look who the supervising officer was.”

John Garrett.

Skye looks up at her, confused, but then it slowly sinks in. May had told her only a few weeks ago what the prisoner in their basement had been saying to Coulson.

“You want me to go down there.”

It’s not a question.

May sighs. “No, I don’t want you to go down there,” she says, holding Skye’s gaze. “But our Director does, and I told him I would ask you.”

Skye glances away, biting her lip. She hasn’t seen Ward since the day he pointed a gun at her back in January. The last thing she said to him was a smug jab that he was about to be destroyed by a weapon better than a bomb—of course she didn’t say it was the woman who had just kissed her outside the perimeter wall. May had taken it from there and exceeded even Skye’s expectations, and Skye had been sure that that was the last they’d see of the agent who had ruined nearly everything for their team.

Of course, she’d been wrong.

Only a few hours after Ward was brought in to their base in the spring, under sedation but still strapped in six places to the stretcher, Skye had hacked through the camera security grid and looked in on him in his little box, seeing him without him seeing her. Her blood had run cold at the sight of him there, just a few vertical meters away from all of them, and she had closed out the feed and never looked again. The past few months have been hard but still the some of the best of her life—she wasn’t about to let his presence ruin it.

He still makes appearances in her nightmares, though, an increasing number of which include her running through the Base and finding her teammates dead in puddles of blood, knowing that she has to get to May before he finds her first and--

And even if May has no idea what she dreams about at night, Skye knows this is the part where her significant other and her supervising officer are in conflict with one another. May wants to tell her she doesn’t have to see Ward ever again. But her S.O. will tell her to obey her Director.

Skye can make it easier on her—this is the whole point of calling herself a SHIELD agent.

“I’ll do it,” she agrees quietly, looking up at May again. “I’ll talk to him about whatever intel Coulson’s after and get what I can, but that’s all I’m willing to say to him.”

May reaches out and grips Skye’s biceps gently, a move that still feels like an embrace even though they’re on the Bus and PDA is a rule May still barely bends on. “That’s all we need you to say.”

Outside Vault D, Koenig shows her how to operate the tablet, and May lingers beside her even after he moves back down the hallway.

“I know you know why he wants to talk to you,” she says, catching Skye’s eye. “So it would probably be better if you didn’t say anything about our relationship.”

As much as she hates to agree, Skye nods. “I got it. Intel only. But what if he knows anyway?”

May purses her lips. “That’s out of our hands. If he says something, don’t confirm or deny—we’ll...
just see what happens.”

Skye nods, and May squeezes her hand.

“You can do this,” she whispers before stepping away. “Wait a minute before you go in. I’ll be watching on the monitors upstairs with Coulson.”

Skye counts to a hundred, leaning back against the wall and walking herself through the relaxation techniques that are becoming more and more second-nature by now, then takes a final deep breath and opens the door.

At the bottom of the stairs, standing in the pool of a single, suspended light, is the man of her nightmares.

He actually smiles when he sees her.

“Aren’t you a sight for sore eyes?”

May:

Skye executes the interrogation flawlessly—firm and decisive, setting the rules of the exchange herself. The only slip May sees is when Ward steps closer to the barrier and Skye seems to catch sight of the scars remaining from his suicide attempts. He starts to explain to her, clearly playing for compassion points, but Skye shuts him down, disgust obvious in her tone. May thinks of the scars on Skye’s skin and the way she’ll kiss them the next time she has a chance. There has to be a small bit of sympathy still in Skye’s heart, but she’s not giving Ward any chance to play it.

He’s clearly studying her carefully, remarking that he can see that May’s training her and that she’s finally compensating for her right-arm dominance…

He doesn’t mention anything else that he can see, but that might only be because Skye doesn’t give him a chance. When Skye threatens to walk away when Ward doesn’t give any useful intel, he suddenly becomes helpful.

“When Hydra was communicating within SHIELD, we’d use white noise in the gaps between SHIELD’s D-distribution channels to hide messages. SHIELD might be gone, but not those frequencies. If Hydra is giving commands to Creel, that will be how.”

Koenig immediately sets to work on the computer behind her, scanning the channels while she and Coulson continue to watch the monitors.

“We’ll see,” Skye says in a compassionless tone, turning away.

“It’s true,” Ward insists, lingering close to the barrier, and May thinks of the last time he and Skye stood that close, the things he said to her… “And so will be every word I say to you for the rest of my life. I’m not asking for forgiveness. I just want to help you. And when that information proves true, I hope you’ll come back. There’s much I want to tell you about—“

Skye hits the button to mute the barrier, and May lets out a breath she didn’t realize she was holding.

Beside her, Coulson bumps her with his elbow.

“She did great,” he says when she looks over at him. “Give her a hug from me later.”
The intel helps them track down Creel’s next directive—to attack General Talbot—which works out perfectly for them, since they need to get ahead of him to the warehouse that they’re betting is his ultimate objective. By the time Creel is locked up there and Coulson is sending their team in after the “Obelisk” that started this whole week in the first place, Hartley and her team have apparently had enough.

“Why are we making enemies we have no hope of standing up against?” Hunter demands as they gather gear in the hangar, but this time, Hartley is on his side.

“Yeah—last time we checked, the US government was the lesser of two evils. What’s so important about one 084?”

“This one has a trail of bodies following it, and they’ve just locked up a prisoner there who will probably be out in no time and have no problem getting his hands on it,” Coulson says, glancing only once at May—he’s already told her what else they need to steal from the compound. “If we can get that object into a safer place and keep it out of both parties hands, we need to do that.”

May’s proud of the way she, Trip and Skye only had to share a look to know that she would be covering for them while he and Skye took the plane—the motorcycle waiting nearby practically had her name on it. The mission was never just for the 084—they needed the cloaking technology of the quinjet so that they could finally get their Bus airborne again and get above their enemies. Which makes everything a thousand times worse when she skids up to their flipped SUV on the stolen motorcycle and ducks underneath to find only one of the three people in it breathing.

Hunter looks at her with wide eyes, a relieved sigh seeming to come all the way from his feet as she leans in, taking in the sight around him.

“Creel’s on foot. But he won’t be for long,” he says quickly in a pained voice.

_That means he got what he was after._

“Hartley and Idaho?” she demands, trying to see past him—it’s bad.

“Dead.”

May puts her anger into trying to yank the door open.

“That’s no use, it’s jammed,” Hunter protests, seemingly in more pain as she yanks on the door again. “Creel has the damned thing that burned Hartley. You need to get him. Go!”

_Soldiers are coming. He’ll be taken prisoner. Mission hasn’t changed._

She hands him the Mousehole arc light.

“Good luck,” she mutters, scrambling out of the spray of broken glass and leaping back onto the bike.

She can’t let herself think about the pool of blood beneath Hartley’s arm or Idaho’s head. She has work to do.

A hundred miles, seven hours of recon, and one winding bike ride later, she gets back to the base and fills out her debrief about the girl in the diner who turned to stone before her eyes. She finds Skye curled up in their bed that night, still dressed from the day and seemingly asleep on top of the covers as if she was trying to wait up for her. She rolls over as May comes in, though, and she sees the tear tracks even before Skye swipes a hand across her cheek.
“Hey,” the girl says in a shaky voice, sitting up quickly. May meets her as soon as she stands though and pulls her into an embrace.

Skye holds her back tightly, her chin digging softly into her shoulder, and May can tell by her trembling that she’s trying hard not to cry harder. May had been wondering if she would have to be the one to tell Skye what happened to Hartley, but now she has her answer. She tightens her arms around the girl, smoothing one hand steadily over her back beneath her hair.

“Coulson asked me to go pack up Hartley’s things…” Skye eventually murmurs over her shoulder.

May sighs. “I’m sorry.”

Skye turns her head, and May leans back so she can look her in the eye.

“Did you see her?” Skye asks, fresh tear tracks on her cheeks.

May nods sadly, letting the image of the battered SUV resurface. “Yeah.”

Skye purses her lips, moving her hand to press gently against May’s cheek. “Then I’m sorry too.”

This is far from the first time May has lost a fellow agent, let alone one who was a friend. But she has to remind herself that this is the first time this has happened to Skye—even the day SHIELD fell wasn’t like this for her. Ward’s betrayal left pain and anger in its place—but the death of a friend is like having a space carved out inside of you. There’s pain, of course—but more than that, there’s disorienting emptiness that throws everything off-balance for days. Months.

May has been there. She knows how to walk with Skye through it.

“She was a good agent,” she says truthfully, pushing through the blackness of the day and picking up better memories. “And a good friend.”

Skye swallows on a hiccup, ducking her head. “I was just getting to know her…” she says, her voice quivering again.

May pulls away only to tug Skye over to the bed, waiting until they’re lying side by side and she has pulled Skye against her body before she speaks again.

“I know this sucks,” she says softly once Skye’s head is resting on her chest. “There’s no other way to say it. This is the worst part of our job, and sometimes when it rains it pours.”

“Hunter said something like that,” Skye says quietly. “That life can be a mean drunk, never knows when to stop punching.”

May sighs, thinking of Bahrain and the aftermath where her entire world had turned upside down. “Sounds about right.”

Against her chest, Skye nods. “He also said not to get attached to people. Or to SHIELD. And I told him it was too late for me.”

May drags a hand tenderly through Skye’s hair. “Too late for me too.”

Bahrain ripped her life apart. But it’s only because it’s happened that she’s here now. Choosing to stay with SHIELD even after walking away from her marriage…it had never really been a question. She had given her life to an agency that had ruined her for nearly everything else. Andrew didn’t deserve the mess Bahrain had left behind. She had drifted through five years trying so hard to stay
away from everyone else so that they wouldn’t get dragged into the void with her, but then that persistent man, too stubborn to die, had pulled her back towards the light. And then a star had appeared and hadn’t let go.

Skye’s tears seep into her t-shirt, as if she’s the one who’s thawing, not May. May leans down to press a kiss to the girl’s hair and holds on to the warmth.

**Skye:**

Her heart had nearly stopped when she had heard the gunshot behind her and heard May cry out just before going down, unconscious, and she had barely glimpsed Hunter turning his ICER on her before the second shot rang out and she went down too. Now, her shoulder feels like it got hit with a hammer, and May is grumbling under her breath as she pulls off her own shirt that night.

“Looks like you got kicked by a horse,” Skye remarks, taking in the deep purple bull’s-eye bruise in the middle of May’s back. “I had no idea they hurt that bad.”

“Wasn’t the first time for me,” May mutters, hissing again as she twists out of her sports bra, and Skye remembers back to the day SHIELD fell and the way Coulson iced May when he was still convinced she was a traitor. “You need help getting yours off?” May offers, but Skye shakes her head, managing to get her compression tank off on her own.

“Yours looks worse than mine,” May murmurs as she cracks an adhesive icepack over her knee. Skye picks up another reddy-ice pack in her hands and cracks it, shaking the bag until she feels it starting to get cold.

“Want to lie down?” she offers, but May shakes her head, stepping in front of her and holding out the other ice pack.

“Just stick this one on,” she says, “then I’ll do yours.”

“So how are we going to get Hunter back for this?” Skye asks as she peels off the adhesive paper and carefully applies the pack to the worst of May’s bruise. “Rub down his underwear with itching powder? Hide an open can of tuna in his closet? The old bucket-over-the-door trick?”

“You think that’s all he deserves?” May says with a raised eyebrow once she turns around again, forgoing a bra and simply pulling one of Skye’s loose flannel shirts.

Skye smiles to herself as she lies face down on the bed so that May can tend to her bruise.

“I’m thinking we should drag out the suspense first,” May says, dabbing carefully at the bruise with the cold pack before setting it gently on Skye’s skin. “Make him paranoid for a few days…until he’s jumping every time I walk in the room.”

“That’s cruel. I love it,” Skye says with a grin, closing her eyes in relief as the cold numbs out the pain. May sits with her in comfortable silence for a few minutes longer before getting to her feet, going to the door and starting to pull her shoes back on.

“You not done for the day yet?” Skye asks, wanting to reach for her but not wanting to dump the ice pack out of place by moving.

May sighs. “I have one more meeting with Coulson that has to get done tonight.”
“Are you his acting therapist or something? Skye asks, trying not to sound petulant. “I mean, I’m all for it if you are—he ought to talk to someone. It’s not like he talks to me anymore.”

“He’s got a lot on his plate,” May reminds her quietly, checking her phone and avoiding Skye’s eyes.

“He seems to have enough time to talk to you,” Skye says, hating herself for saying it almost as soon as the words are out of her mouth. And she can tell from the way May looks at her as she stuffs her phone back in her pocket that the woman is perfectly aware of it.

“I’m a little unsure in this moment if you’re jealous of me or jealous of him,” May says, crossing back to the bed and trailing her fingernails lightly down Skye’s bare back. “You miss Coulson, or are you feeling neglected?”

Skye sighs and closes her eyes again as May’s touch makes her shiver—she’s so hopelessly gone for this woman. But this isn’t about doubting her girlfriend’s love…just resenting all over again how much has changed.

“Is it wrong to be both?” she says honestly, keeping her eyes closed.

May sighs again. “If it makes you feel better, I miss him too. Things aren’t the same between us either.”

“It doesn’t make me feel better—it makes me feel sad for you, too.”

“Well, if you’re still awake when I get back,” May says, planting a hand on the mattress on either side of Skye’s head and leaning over until she’s hovering over Skye’s bare back, her hair and breath tickling Skye’s neck, “and as long as my shoulder is still functioning decently, then I’ll make sure and do my part to make sure you don’t feel too neglected.”

She drags her nails over Skye’s skin again as she straightens up, and Skye shivers again as May stands and makes her way to the door.

“I love you,” Skye says, opening her eyes and smiling helplessly over at her.

May picks up her lanyard off the doorknob and looks back with a smile that still makes Skye’s day.

“Love you too,” she says before opening the door and slipping out.

Skye doesn’t manage to stay awake until May gets back. But she still wakes up curled safely in her embrace, and that will never feel like a loss.

**November 4, 2014: May is 45, Skye is 24**

She wasn’t supposed to see Simmons undercover. None of them were. Coulson wasn’t even supposed to meet her face-to-face in her undercover city, but he made an exception after Simmons started crying on the phone during her last call-in. But now, she, Skye, and Hunter are in Morocco on a freighter frozen in ice, the Hydra agent facing down Donnie Gill has a familiar voice, Hunter has his gun sights leveled on the Hydra logo between her shoulder blades, and once May confirms what she’s seeing, she doesn’t think twice before pulling the trigger at him instead.

She radios up to Skye.
“Simmons is coming up with the Hydra team. Maintain her cover.”

“Are you fucking kidding—copy that,” Skye corrects quickly.

May knows she’s in for an earful later. They’ll cross that bridge when she comes to it. She is still below deck hauling Hunter’s unconscious body out of sight when Skye actually pulls the trigger that ends Donnie Gill’s life, but she can hear it in Skye’s voice when she speaks into their radio next.

“The threat’s been neutralized.”

It’s apparently just slated to be a month of firsts for Skye.

She doesn’t get a moment alone with her until they’re all back at the base, unloading the many cases of Hydra hardware they were able to seize from the freighter before they left.

“In case you’re wondering, I’m all right,” Hunter says when he catches her on her way back into the plane. “Nasty-looking bruise on my shoulder, hurts like hell, but I deserved it.” He sounds surprisingly sincere, but May only responds with a humorless “Mmmmm.”

“So…we’re even, right?” the man asks cautiously, watching her nervously. May can’t help but smile, remembering Skye’s ideas for payback.

“We are,” she responds with a smirk.

He thinks she’s talking about Trip, and May climbs the stairs up to the cabin still smirking.

She finds Skye sitting on the holocom, her laptop on her knees.

“Reminds you of old times?” May says from the doorway, remembering when their team had once been six people standing in this space. Now Fitz is in recovery, Ward is locked in their basement, Simmons is in Hydra, and the glass around the table still hasn’t been replaced. Like their team, the plane is still on the mend.

“They still haven’t found Donnie Gill’s body,” Skye says quietly, the words landing heavily.

May steps closer, leaning on her elbows on the table beside Skye.

“You okay?” she asks, letting Skye decide if she’s ready to talk about it.

She should have known—Skye is always ready to talk.

“No,” the girl says, setting her computer aside and hunching forward, her elbows on her knees. “I get why Coulson kept what Simmons is doing from us—I understand he’s protecting her, making sure no one compromises her mission, but you knew?”

May is a little surprised that this is what she wants to talk about first, but she goes with it.

“I knew,” she says calmly. This is exactly why she had made sure to be up front with Skye back when they first got together—for moments like this.

One of Skye’s legs swings anxiously, and she looks away biting her lip.

“I’m scared for her. Simmons in Hydra? She is a terrible liar.”

May just smiles in response, suddenly realizing why this conversation feels like déjà vu.
“I’m serious!” Skye insists, turning to glare at her. “I love her, but her trying to lie, it is a horror show.”

“Maybe before, but not anymore,” May says, putting a comfortable hand on Skye’s nearest knee. “She can handle it. She’s good.”

Remembering her part in this scene, she shifts closer, stepping between Skye’s knees and settling her arms on the girl’s thighs and her hands on her hips.

“She’s not the only one,” May says, dropping her voice suggestively. She’s been firm on the rule about PDA around the base, but today feels like a good day to bend a little.

Skye stares solemnly at her for a moment, then puts her hands on May’s shoulders and leans down until their foreheads touch. For a long moment, they just hold each other in understanding silence, and then May tips her face up and kisses her.

If Skye is surprised, she doesn’t show it, only leaning closer and deepening the kiss, making May sure that this is still the right thing to do right now, even if it feels like a band-aid over a bullet wound. She drags her hands gently up the girl’s sides, down her back as the kiss goes on, comforting in the way she’s learned Skye best receives comfort…

Somewhere in this direction of the cockpit, May hears a rustle and a thump just before she hears the sound of the cockpit door closing again. She only smirks to herself, but it’s Skye who pulls out of the kiss, looking startled.

“Did you hear that?” she asks, distracted but not letting go of May, who only presses in closer so that she can press a kiss to the exposed skin of Skye’s chest.

“Don’t worry about it,” she murmurs, slipping her hands beneath Skye’s shirt to drag gently over her skin where the ICER round bruise has faded into a coin-sized mark.

But Skye squirms a little, leaning back. “May, someone’s up here,” she says insistently. “We shouldn’t—“

“No, it’s just me,” May says, looking up at Skye with a smug smile. “Just a younger version of me finally getting a clue.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all for your wonderful feedback on the last chapter—I always appreciate it. I’m so glad that fluff-dump was as good for you all as it was for me. We’ll be going about this fast through season 2, combining some eps into single chapters while others stand alone. Some new big things are coming, we know, so get ready for more feels.

As always, happy to chat/answer questions on tumblr: loved-the-stars-too-fondly
Facing It

Chapter Notes

So, we've officially broken 200,000 words, woohoo, but more importantly, I finished Nanowrimo today! That brings us up to the events of the 2a finale, so there will be a few more chapters coming out over the next few weeks.

This chapter ended up with a lot more fluff at the front than I expected, but I think every person who loves May has watched this episode at least five times, so I didn't think it was necessary to have to much of the action here. Enjoy!

November 8, 2014: Skye is 24, May is 45

She has been trying really, really hard not to resent the roles assigned for this mission.

They had planned everything before they’d flown out yesterday, of course, their shrunken team of field specialists plus Mack and Fitz standing around the Bus’s holocom, reminding her of simpler times. She’s not sure if Coulson put himself on this mission because he desperately needed some time outside the base as well, or because he’s just so eager to see another example of the symbols that he’s had her working on for months, the same ones Skye had seen appear on the Obelisk right after Hartley grabbed it…

Either way, as mission leader, he’s the one giving assignments today, and Skye is not happy with being put on back-end comms and surveillance.

“You don’t look old enough to blend in with a crowd of Miami millionaires, Skye,” he had added as soon as the assignment was out of his mouth, anticipating her protests. “Even with a convincing cover story about you and Trip being a pair of new Instagram millionaires, guests and guards would still be paying too much attention to you for your presence to be helpful.”

So Skye is trying very hard not to resent Coulson for getting to be May’s date to the charity event; it’s just that she and May have still never had a proper date, and an event like that would have been a hell of a way to end that streak. Still, in Red-state Retiree-ville, America, two women arriving as each other’s dates would garner some attention they really don’t need, though Skye’s betting if she went as Coulson’s date, no one would bat an eye at their age difference… (ugh…).

Any efforts to not feel resentful, however, evaporate immediately though once she peeks into the garment bag May hangs on the back of the door as she ducks into their shared bunk on the Bus (Skye’s old one) to start getting ready for the event that Saturday morning.

“Are you kidding me, May?” Skye says, staring at the shimmering dress. “I haven’t seen you dressed up since New Year’s Eve when I was a teenager, and you choose this dress to break that streak with? You could at least go easy on me…”

May setting a few other bags on the desk, and she shoots Skye a look that is attempting to seem annoyed but still looks a little smug.

“Can you think of anything you’ve seen me do in the past year that would have been easier in a
“Maybe not easier, but damn, it would have made it hot,” Skye sighs, zipping the bag back up and slumping down on the bed.

“The action movie industry agrees with you there,” her girlfriend mutters, starting to strip out of the workout gear from their morning tai chi routine (no actual working-out was done—May has always taken it easy on mission mornings).

“Well, if you could see what I see…” Skye murmurs with a suggestive smirk as she watches May undress.

“Aren’t you supposed to be changing too?” May reminds her, reaching for one of the shopping bags on the desk and pulling out an undergarment set that will work underneath the cut of the dress.

“I am not missing this,” Skye says with a grin, stretching out on the bed and propping her chin on her hand as May pulls on the underwear and slip. “You’ve been holding out on me with the lingerie.”

“If I had known it would make you this nonsensical, I would have held out a little longer,” May says, shaking her head but smiling at Skye in the mirror over the desk.

“What can I say? You’re gorgeous,” Skye shrugs, still smiling dreamily, not the least bit ashamed. “And I know you said we weren’t going to do anything on the plane with everyone else sleeping on here with us last night, but you’ve at least got to let me take that off of you later.”

May finishes taping down the cups of the slip—better safe than sorry, I guess—and turns to Skye with a smirk.

“If this mission goes off without a hitch, then I’m sure I can allow that much.”

She opens the garment bag and takes the sheath of sparkling silver off the hangar, and Skye carefully helps her into the dress, surprised by the long sleeves.

“Seems a little hot for Miami,” she notes, stepping back while May straightens the garment out.

“I’m making up for it with the skirt,” she mutters, tugging at the hem. “Win some, lose some.”

May has already rinsed and blow-dried her hair, opting for a simple relaxed style (anything off her neck looks too severe, anything more styled won’t last in the humidity). She had already promised yesterday with a roll of her eyes that Skye could do her makeup, so when she holds out the makeup bag and sits down on the desk chair, Skye grins mischievously and immediately sits down across May’s thighs, the same way May had done for her haircut.

May looks surprised but quickly recovers.

“You look far too smug right now,” she mutters, shaking her head.

“Do something about it then,” Skye smirks back, pulling out the eyeliner.

“Not enough time,” May smiles, resting her hands on Skye’s hips. “You’ve got twenty minutes before you need to roll out.”

Skye quickly applies May’s eyeshadow and defines her brows before carefully applying mascara. May’s got such great skin that she only adds a little base to soak up the inevitable shine that happens in 95% humidity, skipping contouring altogether.
“Blush?” she asks, holding up the small pot of rose-tinted powder. May shrugs, so Skye picks up the lipstick instead.

“First, though…”

She kisses she plants on May’s lips is long and involved, and though she’s careful not to smear her makeup, Skye doesn’t hold back much. By the time she pulls away, May’s hands are fisted in the fabric of her t-shirt and they’re both more than a little breathless.

“Well, that takes care of the blush,” Skye manages in a husky voice, smiling proudly.

“Tease,” May grumbles, shaking her head again but smiling nonetheless.

“Just want to make sure I’m still on your mind when you’re out there pretending to be married.”

“If I’m not thinking about how much I hate the shoes, I’m sure you will be.”

Skye glances at the silver three-inch stilettos waiting in a box on the floor near the door.

“You wear heels all the time, May.”

“Not stilettos,” May reminds her. “Stilettos can kill someone if you step on their throat, and that is literally the only use they have in my eyes.”

“But they match the dress and make you almost the same height as Coulson,” Skye says knowingly as she carefully applies shade and gloss to May’s mouth.

“Which he’s going to love,” May says once Skye’s done, rolling her eyes.

Skye leans back to admire her handiwork.

“Okay, I think I’m done,” she says, climbing off quickly before she can “waste” more time on May’s lap. “You have jewelry to match that number?”

“Not the kind that’s worth anything,” May says, picking up a small plastic bag off the desk. “Costume jewelry at its finest.”

She stands to use the mirror to hang a pair of silver chandelier earrings from her ears, then Skye watches her slip a bangle on one wrist and a large, square-cut solitaire “diamond” onto her left hand. The jealousy that rises up suddenly in her chest catches Skye by surprise, and she looks away, turning away and busying herself by finally changing her own clothes.

“Did you wear your ring on the field when you were married?” she asks, swapping out her workout tank for a light, linen button-down.

“Of course not,” May says behind her, sitting down again and pulling on her shoes.

Skye pulls on a pair of jeans and doesn’t let herself ask if May would wear a ring if she gave her one. They’re not headed that direction; May would have told her so a long time ago if they were. Skye usually tries not to dwell on this, tries not to wish that it were possible for them and tries just to be happy with the relaxed peace they’ve finally reached in their ridiculous lives. May has promised she’s not going anywhere, and Skye is trying to let that be enough.

She shouldn’t have been surprised that May notices the difference in her silence though.

“Hey,” May says close behind her, sliding her arms gently around Skye’s middle and pulling her
back against her body—the sequined material of her dress is rough through Skye’s clothes. She covers May’s hands with her own and leans back into the touch—in heels, May’s the same height as her. She pivots once, only so she can see May by looking at her in the mirror, and over her shoulder, her girlfriend smiles.

“I promise I’ll always come back, remember?” May murmurs near her ear, and Skye nods, pursing her lips and staring down at their joined hands.

“I just sometimes wish I could imagine that someday, if all this is ever...normal again, we could do normal things like that. Go to parties together. Act married. And not be chasing strange symbols on the backs of paintings.”

“I understand,” May says quietly. “Being normal sounds appealing some days. But I’m sure we’d get bored fast.”

Skye can feel the false diamond underneath her hand. She’s never asked about the person who gave May her only real wedding ring, still not sure if she really wants to know. May tightens her grip, squeezing her gently against her chest, and Skye tries to focus instead on the heartbeat she can feel against her back.

“We need to get comms set up,” May finally whispers, “and you need to get going.”

Skye nods, closing her eyes briefly and barely sighing. Back to work. She tries to step out of the embrace only to have May tighten her arms softly around her one more time.

“Hey,” May says, and Skye looks up at her in the mirror again. “I love you,” May says in a tone that begs Skye to hear it. She smiles back, knowing she can’t mess up May’s make-up and raising their joined hands to kiss the back of May’s hand instead.

“Love you too,” she responds, stepping away and picking up her bag. “Come home safe.”

She misses the look on May’s face at the sound of those words, just closes the door behind her and hurries down to the garage.

May:

She can tell that Skye’s getting huffy the longer she listens to her and Coulson playing married, but May can’t really help that right now. They have a cover to maintain and some important things to talk about, so she only feels a tiny bit guilty when they turn the comms off.

“You think I didn’t notice your hand tremoring on the flight out?” she says quietly as they move through long-forgotten steps on the dance floor.

She’s been watching him like a hawk as his carvings have become more frequent. Lately, he’s been putting up a new mural at least twice a week. He was overdue for his last carving yesterday. Now, he must be feeling like an addict in need of a fix.

“Did the others notice?” he mutters, avoiding her eyes.

“No,” she returns with less certainty than is convincing. “Skye’s asking the usual too many questions, though, but they think that we’re still here to investigate familiar symbols. They don’t know it’s personal.”

“Good.”
“Phil,” she cautions him, letting him swing her out and then pull her back in, “if I think this mission is too much for you, I’ll pull the plug.”

“Fine. I understand. But that’s not why I turned off the comms,” he says, finally meeting her eyes. “I know you don’t want to talk about this, but we need to make a plan in case I go the way of Garrett.”

Oh. That.

Now it’s May’s turn to avoid his gaze.

“You’re right. I don’t want to talk about this.”

“I don’t want to talk either, but you know it’s important…”

And then she spots Talbot and everything takes a turn.

She should have known. She’ll tell herself that so many times through the next few days—she should have known. She’d had a feeling there was a catch, she had been surprised by the man’s change of heart, confused by his change in mannerisms…

Should have known it was all wrong.

So when she punches him across the face and sees the flicker of an electronic hologram, she shouldn’t have been as shocked as she was. Shocked enough that she forgot about her surroundings as she ripped it off, forgot about the third person in the room as she clutched the flickering, paper-thin mask in one hand, gaping at the stranger staring back at her from where Talbot’s face had just been…

Then a crippling jolt of electricity had seared into her back, and she cried out into a space that was suddenly not the hotel room she had been in…

She’s not sure how much time goes by between blacking out and coming to, but when she does, she’s tied to a chair beside the breakfast bar of the same hotel room she had entered before, and although there’s a towel tucked around her body, she’s not wearing a single thing she’d been wearing before. Not even the ring.

Did I—

I must’ve—

As she yanks against her restraints, the man who’d been hiding behind Talbot’s face turns toward her with a leer.

“Welcome back, Agent May,” he says with a smug smile. “I have a few questions for you. For example, how exactly you pulled off that little disappearing act.”

May dials her expression to bored neutrality even as it feels like her insides are freezing over.

Shit. Shit. Shit…

Her undergarments are on the floor, but the rest of her clothes are nowhere in sight.

Agent 33 must be wearing them, probably along with the holo-mask, to go get Coulson. They probably called him from your phone and got the location…the team would all be on the plane when
All she’d have to do is plant one bomb...

I’ve got to get back there.

She’s been ignoring the man’s monologue up to this point, but he suddenly leans into her space, his hands pressing her wrists down against the arms of the chair.

“You will tell me what I want to know,” he sneers, so close that she feels his breath against her face, which just pisses her off more.

“You have no idea what you’re starting,” she responds coolly, glaring fearlessly back at him.

“Perhaps,” he concedes, though he doesn’t sound at all worried, “but I serve a man who has an effective way of getting the information he wants. And he’s always been very interested in people with special abilities, such as yourself. You will meet him soon, and you will comply. Until then—“

He reaches over her head and yanks down one of the suspended lamps, gutting out the wires and touching them together until they spark.

“—I’ll improvise.”

She doesn’t give up anything. She’s been trained for this, and, truthfully, he’s barely tipping the scales on her pain threshold. He seems determined to keep using the electricity, as if certain it will cause her to disappear again, never once switching to one of the many metal objects she’s already identified throughout the room. The sparks against her skin burn, the live wire is uncomfortable, but by the time there’s the sound of a scuffle (and someone speaking with her own voice) outside and he moves towards the door to investigate, she’s awake enough and pissed enough to finally wrench one of the arms of the stool up and free herself from her bindings. She pauses only to yank back on the slip lying on the floor between her and the Hydra agent—the only thing that could make this worse would be fighting completely exposed...

By the time she’s got him disabled on the floor and she’s throwing open the hotel-room door, Coulson seems to have the other woman on the ropes. There is a split second of wide-eyed eye contact as May takes in the sight of herself—not yourself, no, Agent 33 with your face—staring back with undisguised contempt, but Phil seems to think it necessary to reassure her.

“She’s not you.”

May knocks the other woman away from him with one kick, and the strangest fight of her life begins.

She’s only just managed to take down Agent 33 by jamming the live wire into the mask on her face when Coulson races in with the painting tucked under his arm. He barely pauses at the sight of the other “May”, unmoving on the ground at her feet, a burn sizzling across the left side of her face before facing her with a panicked expression.

“We gotta go.”

Her adrenaline keeps her sprinting, nearly naked and on bare feet, after him out the terrace, down the lattice, and through the parking lot to the SUV, and she thinks they really ought to check it for anything 33 may have left behind but there’s no time for that right now with Hydra apparently on their way in…
She doesn’t even demand the driver’s seat—she’s just glad he has the keys.

As he throws the car into gear and gets them on the road away from the scene, she reaches over and pulls his phone out of his jacket pocket.

Trip answers immediately.

“Coulson? Are you still with May?” Trip demands as soon as the call connects. “You might want to shoot her, I think she’s the one—“

“Yes, she was Agent 33 in a mask,” May interrupts. “She’s been taken care of, and we’re fine. Are you guys all right? You should probably sweep the plane for—“

“Yeah, about that…”

She puts him on speaker as he describes the mess the Hydra virus has made of their plane. Coulson’s face goes pale under the passing streetlights, but they both sigh with relief when Trip gets to the end of the story.

“We got it under control before the wings blew with the fuel inside, but it’s going to take us a while to get everything repaired.”

“Are Fitz and Mack already organizing everyone to get it done?” Coulson asks, leaning towards the phone.

“Already starting work,” Trip assures them. “Mack’s working on the hardware and Fitz is coaching Hunter through the wiring. Skye’s working on the computer systems, but she’s still freaking out for all of us worrying about you guys.”

Coulson tries to smile.

“All right. We should be back in half an hour or so. Tell Skye that May’s all right and not to worry, but someone needs to have a med kit ready when we get back.”

May shoots Coulson a glare, and Trip seems to hear it through the phone.

“I might leave off that last part until the last second…”

“Fine with me,” May mutters. “See you soon.”

She hangs up and drops the phone back into the cupholder, and a heavy silence descends. Neither of them speaks until they stop at a gas station ten miles away from the hotel to sweep the car for trackers, bombs, or anything else Agent 33 might have left to make their evening more fun.

“I’m sorry,” Coulson finally says as soon as he kills the engine. “I’m so sorry, Melinda, I didn’t know until it was nearly too late—it could have been too late…”

“I’m alive, we got the painting, the team is fine, we can fix the plane…” May grumbles, unbuckling her seatbelt. “Now shut up, Phil, and give me your jacket. I don’t want to look like some hooker you picked up on your way home.”

They finish sweeping the car in silence, find nothing, and set off again in the direction of the hangar where the Bus is hidden. The adrenaline is wearing off, and her torture session is catching up with her. Inside his coat, she starts to sweat and shiver, so she closes her eyes and focuses on her breathing, pressing down on everything that’s unwelcome and attempting to shelve it.
“I thought she was you even after she started saying strange things,” Phil whispers after a quiet mile. “She was acting different, and my first thought was that it was some you from the past or future. So I asked her when she was visiting from. And when she clearly had no idea what I was talking about, I knew something was wrong…”

Without opening her eyes, May sighs. 

Two for two.

“I time-traveled when she tasered me.”

She feels him look over at her, shocked, and finally opens her eyes, staring straight ahead.

“I don’t know how long I was gone or even where I ended up, but they would have seen me disappear out of my clothes and reappear unconscious. If she and that other guy swap stories later, they might be able to put it all together, but I’m not sure if they’ll believe time travel was the obvious answer.”

“May…” Coulson nearly groans. “Jesus Christ.”

She looks over, annoyed that he’s the one more bent out of shape about this.

“Phil, we can’t worry about this, not with everything else that’s going on right now. What could Hydra possibly do with that information?”

“Oh I don’t know, May, they’ve already got so many other things we don’t need them to have…”

“Hey,” she snaps, dialing up her glare. Beside her, he sighs, adjusting his grip on the wheel.

“Sorry,” he says heavily. “I’m just… Scared. ‘Hydra’s already after valuable assets. Who knows what they might do to find out more about you.’

May can only shake her head. “Cross that bridge when we come to it.”

She thinks back to the few things the Hydra agent said to her and tries to remember anything useful.

“He said they have a leader who is very interested in people with abilities. We need to make a note of that—we still don’t know much about the man in charge. This guy tonight seemed pretty determined to get information about SHIELD out of me, so they must not be too up on our operations right now. He also tried shocking me to make my ‘little trick’ happen again…”

“Not very clinical, was he?” Coulson says with a weak attempt at levity as they take the highway out of the city towards their waiting hangar. May smirks to herself, happy to oblige.

“Amateur at everything. Including fighting. I get the impression that he usually has other people doing his dirty work.”

The short silence that follows feels slightly more relaxed. Eventually, Coulson looks over with a small smile.

“So…what was it like, fighting yourself?”

She snorts. “You remember how I used to spar with my younger selves sometimes?”

“Yeah.”

“It was nothing like that.”
They should be able to laugh about this, but she can’t seem to get more than a smile out.

“Well, I know you’re worried about the plane,” he says after an awkward pause, “but I’m not letting you start helping with repairs until you’ve let someone take care of your injuries and you’ve actually rested.”

She tallies the aches and pains in her body and decides that she won’t say no to that. There are five capable team members who can get things started.

He pauses for a moment, then adds, “And you know, there’s a talk that I had with Fake You that I still need to have with the Real You.”

May sighs and looks away, out the window at the lowlands sliding past in the darkness.

“I know.”

The hangar eventually comes into sight, and May can see Skye is waiting on the lowered ramp with a blanket clutched in her arms. Despite the pain in her chest, May still smiles as she climbs out of the car and meets Skye as she rushes at her.

“It’s okay,” she says quickly as the girl tackles her into a hug, seeming to have forgotten for a moment that she might be a little less sturdy than usual. May suppresses a groan and tries to hold Skye with enough strength that she actually seems ‘okay’, but Skye’s outdoing her grip by a long shot. She hears Phil climbing out of the car and looks over Skye’s shoulder to see Trip standing at the top of the ramp, looking relieved but staying out of their moment.

“You take care of her,” Phil says in Skye’s direction as he rounds the car, passing them on the way towards Trip, “We’ll take care of the plane.”

“Phil,” May calls after him without trying to move out of Skye’s embrace, “they know our location. I don’t know how long we have before Agent 33 wakes up and tells someone where to find us. Even if we can’t fly, get us cloaked as soon as you can.”

“Got it,” he answers, moving quickly up the ramp while she and Skye follow at a much slower pace.

“Well, I lost the dress,” May says apologetically as Skye drapes the blanket around her body and walks her up into the plane. “But you can still take the lingerie off me if you want to.”

**November 9, 2014: May is 45, Skye is 24**

They’re in the air before dawn the next morning.

She lets Trip fly and stays in the co-pilot’s seat, happy to let someone else be at the controls for now. She’s had a sink-shower, her burns have been cleaned and bandaged, and she even managed to sleep for a couple of hours curled up on the bed inside Skye’s embrace, but this is still the shittiest she’s felt in awhile. The team worked magic overnight, repairing more than enough for them to get in the air safely, and a whole supplementary mechanic team descends on the plane as soon as they get it docked in the Playground again. Skye, of course, wants to take her immediately to medical, but she and Coulson have a call to make first.

Talbot is as appalled as she can expect a man to be when he finds out someone stole his face, but he is hardly sympathetic.

“Some people are better in small doses,” Coulson says, killing the connection when Talbot threatens
to get a read on their location from the call.

“Meanwhile,” she adds, “now we know Hydra is searching for evidence of the alien writing. That’s not good.”

Plus, they know there’s another person out there carving the symbols now, and that’s worse.

Neither of them needs to remind the other that the biggest danger, though, is that at least one Hydra agent out there knows her secret. There’s no way to guess how this is going to pan out or how big of a ripple this is going to cause. The road ahead is only getting darker, which reminds her of one more thing in the future that she doesn’t want to think about.

May turns to go, trying to think instead of Skye is waiting downstairs to drag her back to medical, and hopefully after that, to bed…

“May,” Phil says tiredly from behind her, and she stops, knowing that she can’t put this off any longer. “I know you won’t come to me to make a plan. That’s why I keep coming to you. This is important. I won’t stop asking. You know I won’t.”

She sighs heavily and turns back to him.

“Fine. Give me three minutes.”

Her duffel of preparations is stowed in an attic on the other side of the base.

“There,” she announces as she thumps it down on the table between them. “Money, passports, travel tickets. I don’t need to make a plan because I already made one. I am not shooting you in the head. I will never shoot you in the head.”

“May,” he tries to interrupt, but she doesn’t want to hear it.

“If things go south, I’m getting you out. Cabin in the Australian outback. Whatever happens, I’ll take care of you.”

He looks at her knowingly. “What about Skye?”

You wouldn’t leave her.

May almost smiles, but this isn’t the time for it. “She wouldn’t leave either of us—what do you think?”

She pulls out one of the passports and shows it to him—everything is ready for Skye to go, too.

Phil looks at the bag of things between them and smiles sadly. “This is, without question, the sweetest, most selfless thing anyone has ever wanted to do for me.” Then he slowly pushes it away, back towards her. “But I need you to forget all that and kill me as ordered.”

Somehow, she knew her backup plan would never work. But it still tears her up inside that he would demand this of her anyway.

That night, she wakes up somewhere else.

There’s a plethora of construction equipment around her as she sits up in the new place, but the room itself seems to be an office. It’s night, and the windows are curtained, but she’s still fairly certain she’s never seen this place before. In the middle of the floor, a natural gas tank squats with an opened
set of shackles hanging from it.

*Strange.*

*Future?*

Normally, when finding herself in a foreign place, especially at night, she would pull herself into a corner or behind something tall and hide herself there, maybe even try to go back to sleep, until time pulled her back to her present. Right now, however, she can hear shouts echoing in a large space outside of the room.

And gunfire.

If this is the future, she’d rather know what she’ll be doing here.

There is a drop-cloth on the floor that looks clean enough, so she shakes it out and pulls it around herself as she steps on quiet feet towards a gaping door leading out to a square atrium with floors of offices (classrooms?) filling a multistory space that only amplifies the sounds made on any level. There seem to be a dozen people racing around, nearly everyone armed, but all of them seem to be people she doesn’t know (yet)…

She steps back into the shadows as a tall young man with sandy hair and a short beard races past her, talking on comms to someone called “Daisy”. More shots ring out upstairs, and from this angle, she can see a woman being lifted by the neck off her feet by a…

*Monster.*

It’s shaped like a human, but can’t be a man—it’s too big. Muscled arms and shoulders hulk beneath a strange head of…hair? And the bullets striking its body seem to be doing nothing…

*What is this? Is this where this road is leading? Phil…*

From the other side of the atrium, she hears his voice.

“No!” Her friend leaps out of the shadows, eyes on the monster on the other side of the gaping space between them.

*He’s not the monster. Thank God…but what—*

Coulson lunges towards the railing as the creature lifts the woman over the side and hangs her into empty space. It lets go of her, seemingly without remorse. Her scream echoes off every wall as she plummets down, out of sight.

Horrified, Melinda turns away, staggering back into the shadows. There’s a monster on the loose, and she doesn’t know how to help—in this situation, she’d rather not even be seen.

She hears more shouts and gunfire before time pulls her back and she thuds suddenly onto the mattress back in her room, bouncing off at an awkward angle and tumbles onto the carpet, startling Skye awake.

“What happened?” is the first coherent thing the girl manages to ask, but May has already climbed back into bed and into Skye’s arms, holding onto her for dear life and not letting go.
Stars

Chapter Summary

Skye gets her first proper date with May

Chapter Notes

Ok I swear this was once going to be a tag on the last chapter...and then it ran away from me...Season 2 really takes off after ep 5, but the timing worked great to give these two one more good memory (and you guys some god-awful fluff) before all that action hits.

Of course I apparently can't do that without throwing in some angst for good measure...

Please enjoy!

November 10, 2014: Skye is 24, May is 45

“So how exactly did you swing this?” Skye asks, watching out the windscreen as the darkened world rolls beneath their plane.

They’re in the quinjet sailing west, just the two of them with May at the controls. They’re both bundled up against the cold front that came skidding down the coast this weekend, but underneath, Skye is wearing the clothes May had tossed at her when Skye walked into their room and found May dressed in slacks and a sweater, hastily throwing some of their things into a duffle bag.

“Put these on,” she’d said, tossing Skye a similar pair of slacks and a long-sleeved blouse before going back to her packing. “We’re going out.”

She had given no other explanation, and they’d been airborne barely ten minutes later. May had waited until they hit a cruising altitude to tell Skye where they were going—the biggest city in the next state over—and why—for a dinner date. It’s already close to nine o’clock, but that doesn’t seem to make any difference to May, and Skye is still thrilled. It's about damn time they got this chance.

“I told Coulson I that needed a night off, you needed a night out, and he owed me a few after what I went through this weekend for a goddamn painting,” May answers. “He can manage without us for one night.”

Skye smiles to herself, but she’s waiting for May to say something else, maybe something about it being a special day. When she doesn’t, however, Skye tries not to feel disappointed. This is basically their first date ever, and she’s excited.

“Did he stipulate that we had to cross state lines for this date?” Skye asks, glancing over at May with a smile.
May nods. “And that we keep the tracker on the plane turned on just in case, even if we do cloak.”

“Are we doing something covert?” Skye asks, looking over, alarmed that she might have misunderstood what exactly May had in mind for tonight.

But May only smirks, nodding at the city approaching ahead of them. “Just an illegal parking job.”

May lands the plane on the helicopter landing pad of a skyscraper once they reach the city, which Skye doubts that May got permission to do. In the plane, they shed their winter gear until they’ve only got jackets over their slacks and sweaters, then secure the (cloaked) plane before taking the elevator down only a few floors to the swank restaurant that occupies one of the top floors of the building. A girl takes their coats just inside the door, and it seems like all the sounds of the world outside get swallowed up in the quiet bubble of the restaurant. A hostess immediately ushers them to a table for two when May tells her her (fake) name, and Skye suddenly feels way out of place as she follows after them.

“I don’t think I’ve ever been to a restaurant with white tablecloths,” she breathes, wide-eyed. “Or crystal. Or someone who pulled my chair out for me.”

May smiles as she seats herself while the hostess helps Skye with her chair and passes her a thick, leather-bound menu, which she opens with wide eyes. She doesn’t know what half the items listed even are.

“When was the last time you came to a place like this?” she breathes, glancing up at May while a waiter fills their water glasses and then steps away again.

“On a mission or off?” May asks as she lays her napkin in her lap, and Skye shrugs.

“Either.”

May thinks for a second. “It would have been when I was still married.”

Skye uses putting her napkin in her own lap as an excuse to look down. Should have known. You had to go there, Skye…

They’ve been together close to a year now, and this is the conversation Skye knows she’s now avoiding intentionally, realizing it’s an awkward thing to finally bring up, so far into their relationship. But now the elephant is in the restaurant with them, and it’s crowding awkwardly over May’s shoulder, staring Skye down.

She doesn’t say anything else, just stares at her menu until the waiter comes over to introduce the restaurant to them and describe the specials of the evening. Skye listens without hearing, keeping her eyes down and trying to figure out if she wants to completely change the subject whenever their conversation resumes. She nods once when May asks if she wants wine, hears her ordering something, and finally sees the waiter leaving again out of the corner of her eye. Then, beneath the table, she feels May’s foot press gently against hers.

“Hey,” May says softly, and Skye finally looks up. May’s eyes are somber in the flickering candlelight. “Talk to me,” she says gently.

Skye bites her lip, not wanting to ruin the evening with this conversation right at the beginning, but she knows it’s certainly not going to be any easier in the future. So she takes a deep breath and asks the question that is, in the end, the only part of the story she really cares about.

“Why did it end with him?”
Him. May’s ex-husband has always just been he, or him, never referred to by name, only pronouns. May has never said anything about him, good or bad, never said where they met, what he’d been like, why they hit it off, how they got together, or why she married him. In the end, though, those aren’t really the things Skye cares to know.

She wants to know how May could commit to someone and then, later, leave it all behind.

If she’s surprised by the question, May doesn’t show it, but she still looks away as she answers, quietly but without hesitation.

“Bahrain happened. I fell apart. And I didn’t deserve his forgiveness any more than he deserved the mess I had become.”

Skye stares at her for a long moment, trying to absorb this answer. May continues to look away, out the window of the restaurant at the city spread out beneath them.

“When you got married,” Skye finally says quietly, “you promised each other ‘for better or for worse’, didn’t you? Isn’t sticking by each other through all that ‘worse’ just part of the deal?”

May’s lips turn up in a sad smile, but she still doesn’t look at Skye. “Sometimes you don’t know what a promise means when you’re making it.”

“But that’s what love is, isn’t it? Or at least, what it’s supposed to be?” Skye responds, barely attempting to rein in an argumentative tone. “Love is keeping the promise even when the future doesn’t look like you thought it would, right?”

May finally looks back at her. Her expression is still somber.

“It should be,” she agrees quietly. “I thought that leaving him was more loving than staying, though. Like I said, he didn’t deserve what Bahrain left behind.”

A waiter arrives with two wineglasses and sets them on the table, and Skye hides behind her menu again while he uncorks a bottle. She has still never asked May to tell her what happened in Bahrain either—if it’s something May wouldn’t even tell Coulson though, Skye knows it must have been awful. May doesn’t ask about the scars on Skye’s wrist and thighs and arm even though they’re years down the road from the events that put them there, but Skye understands now that it’s not because May doesn’t care—it’s because she doesn’t want to owe Skye the stories about her own tragedies in return. She promised back when they first got together that she would never lie to Skye, but what that has sometimes meant is that Skye has to be content with silence, a blank space where a story remains untold.

May’s marriage is still one of those blank spaces. So is Bahrain. And those aren’t ancient history for May—she’s still living in the ripples of both. Asking her to lay them out for her still feels like an invasion of something she’s not ready to share. Skye can live with a blank space as long as she still understands who she’s living with.

And part of that is understanding how May can think it is loving to walk away.

The waiter finishes pouring the wine and sets the half-full bottle on the table and leaves them again, and Skye cautiously peers back over the top of her menu.

“Do you really think you don’t deserve to be forgiven for whatever you did?” she asks May quietly. “How much do you have to hate yourself to say something like that?”

May glances away again. “It doesn’t matter if I think that or not. The universe has been punishing me
ever since I did what I did, making me re-live some of my worst moments again and again, so that, just in case I forget why I shouldn’t be okay, I remember with awful clarity every time.”

This is breaking Skye’s heart for more than one reason, but she can only respond to one part at a time.

“Punishing you?”

May looks back at her, understanding immediately. “Hey,” she says quietly, her foot nudging Skye’s beneath the table again. “For the first five years of time travel, all it was was punishment. It was an invasive, uncontrollable affliction, and besides going back to a few happy memories here and there, it was hard to think of time-travel as anything more than a curse.”

May leans forward then, resting her elbows on the table, her hands landing within easy reach of Skye’s.

“Then you came along,” she says, the faint smile returning. “And everything started to change.”

Skye purses her lips, really not wanting to cry in the middle of a restaurant, and leans forward to wrap May’s hands in hers.

“You know you deserve good things, May,” she says, trying not to sound so choked up. “You don’t need to sabotage your own happiness just because you think you’ve done something awful.”

May smiles sadly, running her thumb gently over the back of Skye’s fingers. “Those are my choices to make. I don’t get that many.”

“May,” Skye says a little more seriously, “you’ve made me promises too, you know. And maybe we don’t know what’s ahead, but I would promise to love you and stick by you no matter what. Can you promise me that too? Or should I not be surprised if you step back when things get bad?”

There you go again, Skye, throwing down an ultimatum without thinking through what happens if you don’t hear what you want to hear…

But May doesn’t look away. “I love you, Skye,” she says solemnly, “and that means I would literally lay down my life for you. Sometimes loving someone means doing things that take you away from each other.”

“When leaving me wouldn’t be loving me,” Skye insists. “I can’t fathom any time or place where that would be loving.”

May squeezes her hands gently. “I can.”

The waiter arrives then to take their order, and Skye pulls her hands out of May’s to pick up her menu, thoughtlessly ordering the first thing she reads that isn’t fish. May orders too, and they pass back their menus, and in the silence that follows, May sighs.

“Yes, Skye,” she says softly, and Skye looks up. May holds her gaze solemnly. “I will promise to stick by you, to protect you, and love you with everything I have, as long as you want me to. I said that the very first night—that choice was already made, even back then. If you want me to stay, I’ll stay. If you need me to go, I’ll go. It’s as simple as that.”

This isn’t exactly what Skye wants to hear, but she recognizes that she can either argue through her first date with May or shelve this for later, and what May’s saying is far from unacceptable. So instead of replying to May’s last words, she picks up her wine glass.
“Let’s make a toast,” she says, remembering something she said during May’s very last visit to her about four years ago.

May picks up her wine glass too, and Skye raises hers halfway between them.

“To the best of times,” Skye says, and May smiles as their glasses touch.

“The best,” she agrees, and Skye smiles back over the rim of her glass and takes a drink.

That night a few years ago, May had corrected her—*What we’ve had so far…what we will have will be so much better. You haven’t seen the best yet.* Now, Skye wonders how far into the future that version of May had been coming from, wonders how many memories that woman had had that the woman in front of her still doesn’t…

So maybe this is not the best it will be, just the best yet. *Believing life can be even better than it already is is not selfishness,* Skye’s therapist had told her once, *it’s just another facet of hope.*

Their conversation is lighter after that, the food is delicious, and when the waiter comes to take their plates and asks if they would like dessert, May smiles before Skye can say anything.

“Yes, it’s actually her birthday in about an hour,” she says, gesturing at Skye, who feels her face light up.

“Well, this will be on the house, then,” the waiter says with a smile, handing Skye the dessert menu, and she grins as she selects the one that seems to have the most chocolate. As soon as he leaves, she turns her smile on May.

“I didn’t know if you remembered,” she says, relieved. “I’m not the kind of girl to remind people about her own birthday…”

“Of course I remember,” May says with a look that softens her eyes into a literal ray of sunshine. “I have a gift for you too, but it has to wait until after dinner.”

“I’ll eat fast then,” Skye says, still grinning when the waiter arrives with a chocolate lava cake with ice cream and a small, lit candle.

May pays, they collect their coats, and as soon as the elevator doors close on them, Skye pulls her girlfriend into a kiss that lasts until the doors open again up on the rooftop level.

“You still taste like chocolate,” May says with a grin as she zips up her coat before leading Skye back out into the cool night to the plane.

Once they're airborne again, May points their plane west. Skye feels like the lingering shadow of their earlier conversation has finally worn off, and she excitedly looks down at the land rolling beneath them.

“Where are we going now?” she asks excitedly as the city fades away.

May only smiles cryptically at her. “You’ll see. You’ll probably want to keep your coat on, though.”

Skye watches cities pass beneath them, remembering her first time in the cockpit with May, another almost-birthday after they’d just managed to free a girl in Utah from a supernatural stalker.

“You had just met twelve-year-old me, hadn’t you?” she asks, glancing over at May, steady on the controls. “That’s how you knew last year when my birthday was?”
May smiles to herself and nods. “Yep. That short visit when you were mad at me for leaving so quickly. I’m sorry about that.”

“Come on, May, don’t be sorry,” Skye insists, reaching over and stroking her arm once. “I hated everyone at that age. I learned a little late to not resent people for things they can’t control.”

A few quiet minutes pass as Skye remembers those dark years of hate and frustration when she had been mad at everyone around her but even more angry at everyone absent—her parents, answers, May, a caseworker who gave a shit…

“I don’t actually know if November eleventh is my birthday,” Skye says, realizing that she's never told May this. “My file said November eleventh, but I know that must have just been anyone’s best guess.”

“Well, it can still be the day you choose to celebrate, I guess,” May says, glancing over with an uncertain look in her eye, “but if you want to change it, go right ahead. You’re the one with the power now.”

Skye smiles at her as May faces front again and starts to bring their plane into a descent. “I’m used to it now,” she says with a smile. “I don’t need to give you two dates to remember.”

After a few minutes, they eventually touch down on a flat stretch of hard-packed desert that, at first, seems completely bare. They’ve long since left cities behind, and Skye opens her mouth to ask May just what in the world she has dragged her out here in the middle of the night for. As she glances up at the sky, however, the sight takes her breath away.

“Oh…”

They must be far from any cities by now because there is no light pollution to dilute the night sky’s splendor. Above them stretches an inky swath of night with stars upon stars crowding into each other, filling the sky from horizon to horizon. Skye’s so enchanted by the sight that she almost jumps when May’s hand slips into hers.

“This way,” she says, tugging her off in one direction, a flashlight beam cutting a path ahead of them. Now that she looks more closely, Skye can see a big, unlit shape rising out of the land not far ahead of them.

A silo. No, a barn?

May leads them right up to the only door Skye can see and knocks soundly.

“Just a minute!” a man’s voice calls from the other side, seeming to echo in a big space. After much shuffling, a bolt slides on the other side of the door, and a spectacled man sporting a very dense beard peers out at them. There’s hardly any lights on in the room behind him.

“Melinda?” he squints. “That you?”

May tilts the flashlight up until it lights her face from below. “It’s me,” she answers, and the man’s face breaks into a smile.

“Was wondering when you were going to show up,” he says, stepping back to let them in.

They step inside a dimly-lit vestibule with him, and May introduces Skye to the man, a Dr. Earnhardt, who May says she knows from a time long past.
“This little girl used to live next door to me in Texas,” the man says, gesturing at May, and Skye almost laughs because she’s never heard anyone refer to May as a 'little girl'. “Her mother would have me over for dinner all the time,” the man continues. “It was a shame when they moved away, though I did see a woman who looked an awful lot like your mother just a few years ago walking down the road in that neighborhood.”

Skye glances knowingly at May and she shrugs. “Wonder who that could have been…”

“Well, Melinda, everything’s all set up,” Dr. Earnhardt says then, shifting away from them and opening a door facing the one they just came in. Skye follows her into the room with May ahead of her, and when she feels the chill come back into the air, takes in the large equipment taking up most of the room, the open space in the ceiling, and suddenly realizes that this isn’t a barn—it’s an observatory.

May is looking at something on a nearby screen with the man, nodding and pointing, and then he steps back, smiling at both of them.

“Well, I’ll be going for a drive to town then,” he says, pulling out a package of cigarettes from a desk drawer. “Need to stock up on coffee and toilet paper. I’ll be back in a couple of hours, but if you leave before that, just make sure to shut the door well behind you. Wouldn’t want to let any coyotes in. Also, be gentle with the equipment. This is a multi-million dollar telescope—you break it, you buy it.” And without that and one more wave at May, he’s gone.

The sound of the outside door shutting echoes in the cavernous room, and Skye looks over at May, confused.

“This is the birthday gift?” She tries not to sound too skeptical, she just can’t quite figure out where this is coming from.

May smiles and takes her hand, leading her over to the reclined seat positioned beneath the enormous telescope. “Let me show you first, and then I’ll explain.”

Skye climbs carefully into the seat, which is reclined nearly horizontal like a dentist’s chair, and May adjusts the viewfinder until it sits over her face. The stars come into view again, and this time, Skye can barely breathe. She’s seeing the same stars that she just saw outside, but magnified, their details suddenly thrown into gorgeous relief against the black void of space. Even more amazing though is that there are more stars that she couldn’t see before, and she can even see the shapes of galaxies and wispy clouds of stardust or something like it, all things Skye has seen in textbooks but could never have imagined seeing in real life.

“Really something isn’t it?” May says beside her, apparently looking at the same view on a linked computer monitor. “Dr. Earnhardt worked at the local university when my family lived in Abilene. That’s a nowhere town in Texas, and one of the only positives was there was a great, big sky to make up for the lack of anything interesting on the ground. He’d be out in his front yard nearly every night with a telescope, and once I got brave enough to ask what was so interesting up there, he let me look with him.”

“It’s amazing,” Skye agrees, unable to stop smiling.

She doesn’t trust herself to touch the controls, but May gives the commands through the computer, panning the telescope around at different parts of the sky. She sees planets suspended seemingly so close to earth, and the dazzling organized chaos of the Milky Way cloud wrapping their solar system, even a close-up of the moon, and Skye stares at the sky for what feels like forever before looking over at May.
“Want a turn?” she asks, and May shakes her head, typing another command on the computer. The massive telescope above her shifts, panning over to a relatively ordinary patch of sky.

“Come over and look at the screen, though,” May says, beckoning her over. “I’ll show you here first.”

Skye climbs out of the seat and goes to stand by May, who is double-checking something from a paper in her hands against the screen.

“I really brought you here so I could show you this,” May says, pointing to a single star in the vista. She shows Skye the paper, a star chart where a single point is marked, and looks at the screen again, showing which star is the point.

“What is it?” Skye asks, peering at the tiny point of light on the screen.

May holds out another piece of paper. “It’s yours.”

Confused, Skye unfolds the paper and reads from the top. It’s detailed and stamped at the bottom, as official as they come. When she finally realizes what she’s reading, though, Skye looks up, her mouth falling open in wonder.

“You got a star named after me?”

In the soft glow of the computer monitor and the night pouring down on them, May smiles. “Skye-25,” she says pointing at the tiny point of light on the screen again. “Happy birthday.”

Completely overwhelmed, Skye throws her arms around May, squeezing her as tight as she can before she remembers the burns on May’s back and loosens her grip a little.

“You like it?” May asks over her shoulder, sounding, somehow, a little nervous. “I didn’t know if…”

“Oh my god, May, I don’t even…I can’t believe…thank you!” Skye stammers, pulling away and kissing her soundly.

When she pulls away, May helps her identify the star on the screen again, then she crowds back into the seat of the telescope with Skye to help her find it in the night sky properly. Skye can’t stop smiling while May talks her through how to find it (“It won’t usually be visible without a telescope, but you can know that it’s always up there. That’s the thing about stars…”), and once she’s had a good look at it, May moves to the controls again to direct the telescope towards other quadrants of night, panning around the measureless universe. Skye’s eyes can barely process it all as she takes in all the chaos of light in a place she’s always considered dark. It suddenly seems a lot less cold and empty. And now she knows that there’s a tiny point in it that’s all hers.

When the tears do start running sideways down her cheeks, it’s for more than one reason.

“What is it?” May asks quietly when she notices (it didn’t take long). Skye purses her lips and wipes the tears with the cuff of her jacket before she sits up, planting her feet on the floor and turning to face May.

“It’s beautiful,” she says, her voice damp, “it’s all so beautiful up there. But also—“ She pauses to swallow, then tries to smile at May. “You got me a star for my birthday, and I got you sunglasses…”

She hears May laugh a little, but she seems to press it down, quickly realizing what Skye means. May closes the distance between them until she’s crowding gently into Skye’s space, pressing her
carefully back against the seat as she laces their fingers together.

“You also gave me dreamcatcher,” May reminds her, her eyes soft as she smiles gently and kisses Skye's forehead. “And a pair of ice skates--" She kisses her cheek, "A year of good memories--" She kisses the other cheek, "And another chance at something I didn’t think I would ever have again.”

Skye smiles tearfully back, and May leans in to press a single, soft kiss to her lips.

“I still don’t have any answers for why all this has happened,” May continues, resting her forehead on Skye’s. “Why I time travel, or why my life and yours have been as tangled together as they are… but I mean it when I say that you are the reason I don’t believe anymore that everything about this condition is just a curse. And if you’re my fixed point, then I want you to have one too. I know the life we live doesn't really allow you a chance at a more permanent home, but I still want you to know there’s a place in the universe where you’re permanent, that it permanently belongs to you. I’d give you galaxies if I could, but we’ll start with a star.”

Skye pulls her hands out of May’s only so she can wrap her arms around her, pulling her against her body in the soundest of embraces. Above them, light pours down from distant worlds, and she holds onto the person she loves most in this one with all the gravity she can summon.

“Thank you,” she whispers over May’s shoulder, and May pulls back to smile at her.

“Happy birthday,” she whispers, and Skye smiles back before pulling her into a kiss.

It takes a few moments for her to pull back from this one, and even then it’s only because she hasn’t forgotten where they’re standing.

“Not to cut you off,” she manages when she and May finally separate, breathing a little harder than before, “but I would really like to get you somewhere more private where we’re not at risk of destroying a telescope that costs more than my life.”

May smirks knowingly. “Well, I was planning to take you somewhere else to spend the night before we head back to base,” she says, and Skye grins. “We can leave whenever you’re ready.”

“Did you get us a hotel room?” Skye asks, heartbeat picking up in anticipation.

“You’ll see,” May says, stepping away and moving back towards the telescope’s controls. Skye follows.

“I want to see now.”

May glances up from the panel, surprised. “You don’t want to look at the stars some more?”

Skye grins. “They’ll still be there. That’s the thing about stars.”

May smiles knowingly. “All right, then. Let’s lock up.”

Their final stop is a short flight from…wherever they are…and May again brings the plane down on a flat stretch of land far from any cities, but this one is more of a meadow, surrounded by trees. Skye is a little surprised to see a forest outside when May lowers the plane’s ramp.

“Are we camping out tonight?” she asks, trying to sound excited, but she thought May might have remembered she’d rather not sleep on the ground ever again in her life…

“I don’t like campouts any more than you do,” May says as if reading her thoughts, picking up the
duffle that Skye had seen her pack before they left. “There’s a cabin on the other side of these trees.”

They secure the plane again and walk hand and hand through the dark, May leading with the flashlight again as they slip through tall, gently-swaying cedars.

“Did you find this place on Orbitz? Skye teases as they walk. “Or did you call in another favor from a friend?”

“I won’t lie to you,” May says as they walk, “this is a S.H.I.E.L.D facility. But it was meant to be an escape from the rest of the world, so it’s all the best parts of a cabin retreat plus the best parts of S.H.I.E.L.D security.”

“Re-vamped since S.H.I.E.L.D fell, I’m assuming?” Skye asks as the outline of a decent-sized cabin comes into view through the night.

“We wouldn’t be here if it hadn’t been.”

Two different fingerprint scanners and a punched-in numeric code are necessary just to get through the door, and May flips on the lights to reveal a pine-and-mahogany cabin, fully furnished and not at all dusty.

“Either you came by ahead of time and cleaned this place up,” Skye says as she steps in and looks around with a smile, “or this place has one of the subtlest cleaning staffs of all time.”

“I’ll let you guess,” May answers, shutting and locking the door and dropping the duffle on the floor.

“Oh my god, there’s a fireplace!” Skye exclaims, already hopping across the room and over to the brick hearth taking up part of one wall near a long sofa. “I haven’t been in a place with one of these since I was little. Can we build a fire?”

There’s a tiny pause that she’s betting is May deciding whether she’s going to tease Skye about clichés again, but she knows she still has one trump card today.

Glancing over her shoulder, she catches May’s eye.

“It’s my birthday,” she adds with a grin, and May shakes her head as she crosses the room.

“Start stacking some small logs,” she says, shrugging off her coat and hanging it over a chair. “I’ll show you how.”

May:

It doesn’t take long to get a fire crackling merrily (there’s a gas line that sure makes this easier than an outdoor fire but Skye looks so pleased with herself as she sits back on her heels that May stops herself from saying anything about that). The fire makes Skye’s eyes twinkle and her face glow like an ember, and May would love to see more of her in that light, but she just smiles to herself and waits, letting Skye have her moment. When the girl finally looks over at her, though, the look in her eye says she’s got similar ideas.

“Are there any cameras in here that I need to disable?” Skye asks, glancing around at the corners of the room. “No need to give anyone else a show.”

May actually laughs a little. “There are plenty around the property, one outside each door, but none inside the house,” she answers.
Skye smiles. “Good.”

She turns and doesn’t waste any time tackling May to the floor and kissing her.

Later that night, after they’ve made good use of the king-sized bed (and a few other surfaces on the way there), the two of them lie cocooned in a quilt together on the sofa, skin to skin as they listen to the fire crackle and watch the shadows dance on the walls. Skye’s cheek is resting near her heart, her fingertips tracing absentmindedly across her stomach, and May is nearly asleep as Skye shifts carefully against her, sighing contentedly.

“Best birthday ever,” she murmurs, her arm around May’s body squeezing her gently in a half-embrace, and May smiles without opening her eyes.

“I’m glad,” she hums, sinking further into the sofa, falling quickly towards sleep that she hopes will be uninterrupted tonight.

“Do we have to go back in the morning?” Skye asks, and May rouses herself a little to reply coherently.

“I told Coulson we’d be back by the afternoon,” she sighs. “24 hours leave was the most I felt comfortable asking for, with everything we’ve got going on.”

There are too many walls he could carve up in that time...

“Well, thank you,” Skye says again. “For the time away together. And dinner. And…everything.”

“I love you, too,” May says in response, and she feels Skye’s smile against her skin.

“Can I ask you something personal and kind of sappy?” she asks a moment later, and May opens her eyes, trying to wake up a little more.

“You can always ask,” she says, looking down at the girl lying against her chest.

Skye is looking away, towards the fire, which is how May knows whatever she’s about to ask is serious.

“When did you fall in love with me?” Skye finally asks softly. “I know when you said it for the first time, but for you…when did you first feel it?”

It’s a fair question, but it takes May a long time to answer as she scrolls through the memories between the girl getting on their plane and the day she finally walked into her room in the Playground and promised to stay.

Something had certainly broken open the day she had gone with a fourteen-year-old to the hospital for a suicide attempt, but that might have been more of a final shattering of her determination to not care about this kid and to prove her future self wrong. Their heart-to-heart after saving Coulson from Raina had been…something. At the very least, she had finally realized that there were deeper things at work, both in Skye’s past and present and her own future. But while those days might have been the beginning of some kind of love, they weren’t the beginning of the love Skye is referring to.

She had been unable to deny that she felt something strong for Skye when the girl was dying of two bullet wounds…especially after she had nearly killed the man who put them there. Then there were those quiet moments during her recovery; the unexpected revelation on a New Year’s Eve in Austin…and something had shifted. It had just taken May far too long to admit it to herself.
You wasted so much time…

“I’m sure I wouldn’t have admitted it even to myself, but I think I was starting to fall for you in London,” she finally answers, remembering evenings the two had spent on a different sofa nearly a year ago, Skye dozing beside her, trusting and patient. “I think that at that time, though, I was too afraid to hope that you might still feel what you’d felt as a teenager, especially after you had seen the kind of person I really was. But when you finally told me the truth-- after Ward and Garrett and Hydra and everything else--I was just so relieved because I knew by then I was starting to feel the same.”

Skye rocks up on her elbow, looking at her so tenderly that it almost hurts. May smiles and reaches up to caress her cheek.

“The short answer is…there wasn’t one moment,” she finishes, holding Sky’s gaze. “Sometimes love shows up like a car through your living room, and sometimes it just sneaks in and makes itself at home. With you, it was more of the latter. In more ways than one.”

Skye smiles as she leans down and kisses her, and May can just feel that these are words that Skye needed, a fact that both comforts and terrifies her. She draws Skye closer, thinking maybe she’s got enough energy to…nah. Maybe in the morning.

“What about you? she asks when they part, keeping Skye close and staring into her dark eyes. “You’ve known me so much longer, but when did you start loving me like this? I sure hope it wasn’t when you were still a little kid.”

Skye’s nose crinkles as she smiles, and she lies back down with her head on May’s chest.

“When I was a teenager,” she answers without hesitation. “There was one visit where you accidentally almost kissed me as you were saying goodbye, and I think that was when everything suddenly…clicked. Why you were visiting me. Why I would be important to you in the future. And it was like I suddenly had this freedom to love you in a different way, a way that had never really occurred to me up to that point. When I finally met you last year, and we were both finally adults, I had been thinking that it was time for everything to begin, but that wasn’t the case. And as disappointed as I was, I eventually realized that not only was it time for you to get to know me for the first time, it was also time for me to get to know you for real. Time to see the whole picture…and fall in love with you again. For the first time, I wasn’t making up stories to fill in the gaps; I finally had the whole you right in front of me, and I think throughout those months everything kind of…solidified.”

“And now I’m getting to start at the end,” May adds, her heart so full that she can barely breathe, “and I get to see all the little stories that made you...you. Slowly, and out of order, but I know I’m so lucky to get to fall in love with you more because of this too.”

She feels Skye smiling against her chest again. She can tell that the girl still glows a little brighter every time May uses the L-word with her, so she still reserves the word for special moments, though she never hesitates to return it when Skye says it to her.

“What do you think it will be like when we meet in the middle?” Skye says then. “When we finally have all the same memories?”

That unanswered, foreboding question—What happens when the List runs out?—hits them both again, and she can feel Skye holding her a little bit tighter.

May runs a hand through the girl’s hair. “I don’t know. Maybe that’s when we peak.”
They shouldn’t have done it—invited the future into the room with them tonight. Something is lurking ahead of them, she knows, unknown and unwelcome, and she doesn’t want to dwell on it any more than Skye does. The Jiejie that she saw back on her own birthday, the one she’d walked in on bleeding and sweating on their bed…she could tell that something bad had just happened. Something terrible. Something that had parted her and Skye, somehow—It’s good to see you, Skye—and May doesn’t know what to do with that. And besides that, there’s the List, the unexpected clock that seems to be counting down to something…some ending.

No. That’s not necessarily what it means. Don’t ruin tonight thinking about this.

Beside her, she can tell that Skye is thinking her own heavy thoughts, and May runs a reassuring hand over her back beneath the quilt.

“I love you, May,” Skye whispers then, still resting against her heart. “You’re it for me, you know. There could never be anyone else after you.”

May closes her eyes, trying to decide how she can respond to this without hurting Skye. There was a different person in her past that May once would have said those same words to…but then life happened. She made the choices she made. She walked away from someone she’d promised forever to.

But if that relationship hadn’t ended, she wouldn’t have had the chance to be here.

“I love you so much, Skye,” she finally murmurs. It feels inadequate after Skye’s declaration, and she wants to follow it up with her own promises about the future, but she knows better than to do that.

She knows better now.

Skye’s fingertips are tracing gently over the bandages still covering the burns on her collarbone, and May feels herself sinking slowly towards sleep again. Before she drops off completely, though, she hears Skye whisper one more question.

“May, earlier when you said I gave you a second chance at something you never thought you’d have…what did you mean?”

May’s not sure if she actually answers or just imagines she does.

“Happiness.”
November 25, 2014: May is 45, Skye is 25

She had not wanted to believe that the spat she watched between Coulson and Skye this morning was a prelude to what would happen throughout the rest of the day, but May had had a feeling, based on the frustrated look Skye shot her on her way out of his office and the way she had avoided her for the rest of the day, that she ought to go check the security monitors when she glimpsed Skye disappearing through the door of Vault D that afternoon.

Skye’s already seated in front of the forcefield barrier by the time May gets the camera feed cued up appropriately on the bay of security monitors, funneling the audio through a set of headphones so that the random assortment of agents milling around in the common room behind her don’t overhear any of their exchange too.

“Surprised it took you so long,” Ward is saying as May holds one side of the headphones to her ear.

“This isn’t about that,” Skye assures him, shaking her head.

This isn’t about what?

“Come on, Skye,” he smirks. “Don’t pretend you haven’t thought about what I said.”

May’s grip tightens on the headset.

What did you say to her?

Skye, what are you doing?

But Skye just calmly shakes her head. “My parents were killed in the Hunan province, along with everyone else in their village,” she returns, sounding certain.


“I know what you’re doing,” Skye warns, staring him down.
“I’m just trying to help you,” he says with a shrug.

“No, you’re exploiting a weakness, trying to find a way in.”

May is still trying to make sense of what they’re talking about, but she can’t help smirking to herself.

*That’s my girl.*

“I told you,” Ward says then, raising his hands and seeming to up his sincerity a degree or two. “I will never lie to you. Not again.”

“Okay,” Skye says suddenly, leaning back in her chair. “If you’re really being honest, name your source.”

Her request seems to catch him off guard. “What?”

“If you have information about my father, tell me where it came from. It's that simple.”

*Why would he have information about her father? How...*

Skye props her elbows on the arms of her chair, waiting, and Ward stares at her for a long moment before answering.

“Raina.”

The name takes a moment to sink in.

*The girl in the flower dress. The calculating mystic who had been screwing with our team for over a year. The woman who kidnapped Ace. And Coulson. And sold our team out.*

*As if we would believe anything she said...*

And fortunately, Skye seems equally incredulous.

“She knows him, Skye,” he says over her laughter.

“No, I believe that you think she does...” she agrees, shaking her head with a triumphant smile, fixing her eyes on him again. “Do you not get it, Ward? Raina played you. She found your weakness and then used it against you.”

“Skye—”

“Shut up, Ward,” she snaps, getting to her feet. “I don’t want to hear you say another word about it.”

He sighs and looks away, conceding.

“Good,” she says, and picks up the tablet, holding it out to him displaying a picture of the carvings.

“Tell me what you know about this.”

May closes her eyes briefly and sighs.

*Well, it was only a matter of time before she took this to him...*

He tells her about Garrett and the manic, psychotic state he’d been in when he put those on the lab doors back in the winter. Even without seeing her face, May can imagine Skye’s expression as the truth sinks in.
It won’t take her long. She’s going to go straight up to Coulson and confront him…Too late to do anything about that. What are you going to do about what else Ward's been telling her?

She watches Skye shade the barrier and sin sharply towards the stairs, moving out of sight of the camera. May disconnects the headset and hides the feed again, her mind still trying to make sense of everything.

Skye’s parents died in the Hunan province—everyone in that village died. That’s what the agent in Mexico told you. There’s no way her father could be alive…And what are the chances that Raina would know him too?…It can’t be true… it’s all just too…

But May doesn’t let herself finish that thought. She’s the last person on this team who should be calling anything impossible.

At her elbow, the base’s secure line rings, she picks it up automatically, waiting for the person on the other side to speak first.

“This is Raina,” a cool voice croons in her ear. “I have some information for Agent Coulson. To whom am I speaking?”

May holds the phone against her ear for several seconds before she remembers to press Hold. She sets the receiver back in its cradle and stares at the blinking “Call waiting” button for a long moment until the sounds of Skye stomping up the stairs behind her brings her back to her surroundings.

Months since this woman disappeared, and then her name comes up in conversation and ten seconds later she calls your base. She’s got either the best timing or the worst.

Maybe she’s clairvoyant too.

Skye:

Coulson had managed to get a bare explanation about the carvings out before May had interrupted Skye’s confrontation with a call—from Raina, of all people—and now they’re scrambling to get a tiny team ready before boarding the plane and heading to her location. Skye’s heart is still pounding as she follows May down to their room in silence, but as soon as the door closes behind the two of them, she lets it loose.

“I can’t believe you,” she says, rounding on May who faces her unflinchingly. “Months, you’ve seen me trying to figure those symbols out. Months, you’ve apparently been waiting for me to pick up a knife and start doing the same thing. And you just watched me day in and day out and said nothing…”

“What would you have wanted me to do, Skye?” May says calmly, folding her arms across her chest. She seems tense, but her tone is completely unapologetic. “You’ve known from the beginning how forthcoming I am willing be with you when it comes to SHIELD-related intel.”

“Don’t throw that excuse at me,” Skye snaps, throwing up her hands. “We’re not talking about some mission or operation, we’re talking about your friend and mine, and the fact that he may be slowly dissolving into the psychopath that Garrett became, and you’re telling me you were okay with not saying anything to anyone?”

May looks insulted by this accusation, her eyes narrowing. “Of course I wasn’t, but I understood why no one else could know what was happening to him.”

“That’s where you’ve been all those late nights, isn’t it?” Skye says, suddenly making the
connection. “All those late night ‘meetings’—you were watching him make these?” She grabs a handful of the photos from her desk and throws them in May's direction, and they scatter as they float to the ground between them.

“That’s what was happening, yes,” May responds, completely ignoring the photos landing at her feet. “We were both afraid of what might happen if he gave into his impulses without supervision.”

May’s enduring calm just makes Skye angrier. Her hands ball into fists at her sides.

“Well, besides him, what about me?” she demands, one foot barely shifting forward, stepping on the photos. “He’s telling me the two of you had already come up with some theory that I’m not filling our walls with scribbles because I’m already an alien, not slowly turning into one like Coulson? I mean, Jesus, May, how could you—”

She cuts herself off, forcing herself to turn away and take a deep breath.

“We were trying to protect you,” May says calmly from behind her. “Two people in this base stressing about the situation was enough. There was nothing to be done about the theory, and for me, I was just glad you weren’t carving too. You didn’t need to worry unnecessarily about him or yourself.”

Skye sighs, still forcing herself to breathe slowly, and she hears May shifting, probably starting to change clothes for their mission.

“I guess I’m mostly just pissed that the person down in our basement is being more honest with me than the person I’m sleeping with,” Skye mutters.

She feels the air in the room drop a few degrees. It’s a low blow, and they both know it.

“I am not even going to dignify that with a response,” May mutters behind her, and Skye turns to see the woman yanking on a clean shirt, her gaze sharp. “You want to rant and rage at me for following orders, fine, but I’ll need you to save it for later tonight.”

May picks up their gun cases and strides to the door. “We have a mission,” she reminds Skye, banging the door open. “You’ve got six minutes to get changed and get on the plane.”

Skye doesn’t speak to her again on the entire flight out, deciding she has no reason to tell her what Ward said this morning.

The location Raina picked is down in Atlanta, a swank French restaurant in the middle of the downtown area. It’s a nice place, but fortunately, it’s a Tuesday and still early in the evening, so there aren’t many diners filling up the tables. She and May stake Coulson’s table out from the kitchen after convincing the owner that they have plenty of good reasons and more than enough money to compensate him for the inconvenience, then stand back and wait.

Of course, Raina arrives wearing a flower dress.

They’re all on comms, so they can clearly hear everything Raina says to Coulson after they sit down across the table from one another. Coulson is clearly not in the mood for Raina’s games, and Skye remembers how the last time they saw each other face to face was when she was torturing him with a memory machine in the middle of the desert. The back and forth continues for a few minutes—Coulson asks for the Obelisk, Raina says it’s somewhere she can’t get to it anymore—but finally, the small woman shows her hand…and a photo on her cell phone.
“Right now Hydra’s looking for a spy within their ranks. I wonder what would happen to Agent Simmons if this were to fall into the wrong hands.”

Skye’s heart is beating somewhere in the region of her stomach as Raina slides the phone across the table. In her periphery, May looks startled but not yet scared, watching out the kitchen door.

“I don’t like being threatened,” Coulson responds carefully in their ears.

“This isn’t a threat,” Raina insists, her tone still far too light for the topic. “It’s a gesture of goodwill. I would like nothing more than to delete that photo.”

“And in return? What do you want?”

“From you? Nothing,” Raina replies casually. “But I will need to take Skye with me.”

May looks over her shoulder at Skye.

Now she looks scared.

“Excuse me, but what the hell is this really about?” Coulson demands. “And why, also in the hell, do you think I would ever let that happen?”

Raina’s tone is disgustingly smug. “To prevent every Hydra employee from receiving an automated email with that photo.” There’s a small pause. “You have two minutes, after which there’s nothing I can do.”

No, Skye’s mind screams as she stares anxiously over May’s shoulder at Raina, waiting calmly. What are you doing? Don’t ask him to do that—he’d do anything to protect us...

“No, Skye’s mind screams as she stares anxiously over May’s shoulder at Raina, waiting calmly. What are you doing? Don’t ask him to do that—he’d do anything to protect us...

“Where are you planning to take Skye?” Coulson asks calmly.

“Somewhere she’s always wanted to go,” Raina answers with a smile. “To meet her dad.”

May looks over her shoulder again, but Skye can’t focus. She can’t breathe.

...

...

He is alive.

She does know him.

Ward was telling the truth.

May is staring at her severely, as if trying to burn through a smokescreen with her gaze.

“Skye, she’s lying,” May hisses, a warning in her tone as she draws Skye’s attention back to herself.

“Ward said Raina knew him,” Skye stammers, her mind still reeling. “This cannot be a coincidence.”

In their comms, Raina is still needling at Coulson.

“No good man would keep a daughter from her father. Especially when so much is at stake. Give Skye what she’s always wanted, or else Agent Simmons dies.”

There’s a horrible pause. Skye doesn’t know how many seconds are left.
Then, suddenly, Coulson slides Raina’s phone back across the table.

“No deal.”

No!

Skye’s heart restarts with a kick, and she lunges at the door, but May is faster, barring her way with her body.

“Stand down, Skye,” May nearly snarls, eyes drilling into hers.

“Were you not listening?” Skye demands frantically, finally making eye contact with May. “If I don’t go out there, Simmons is going to die!”

“Coulson has a plan,” May says firmly, not budging.

“He also carves alien writing into his desk,” Skye snaps back, “so maybe his judgment is not what it used to be.”

She tries to get through the door again, but her attempt is short-lived. May’s hand closes on the fabric of her sweater, and before she realizes what is happening, her back slams into the nearest wall.

“I said stand down,” May says again through gritted teeth. She touches her ear and then Skye’s, turning off their comms, and crowds closer, still threatening. “You may not trust Coulson, but right now I need you to trust me,” she says in a low voice. “Simmons is going to be fine. But you need to listen to me, and you need to stay away from her.”

Skye can’t speak, but she holds herself still and manages a nod. May nods back, flipping their comms back on but not relaxing the arm barring Skye’s shoulders.

“I can’t believe you would sacrifice the lives of one of your own agents,” Raina is saying disbelievingly.

Two minutes must have run out by now. Skye feels sick.

“We all take risks in this business,” Coulson responds, and Skye can hear him shrugging. “In your case, it just didn’t pay off.”

May gives Skye a warning look as she finally backs away, moving back to stand in the ajar door. “Hunter, get over there and crowd her in case she tries to run,” she orders, her attention shifting back onto the scene unfolding in the restaurant dining room.

Hunter obeys, pulling a third chair up to the table and needling Raina right back.

“Tiny violins playing,” Skye hears him say as he sits down. “No one’s listening, sweetheart.

“Who’s making you do this?” Coulson asks, a little gentler now.

“Hydra,” Raina answers, sounding defeated.

“They want the Obelisk, but you don’t have it,” Coulson says knowingly. “Skye’s father does.”

Skye feels May glance back at her again, but she keeps her eyes on the floor.

“He won’t stop until he gets her,” Raina is saying, and now Skye can hear the fear.
“You’re scared of him,” Coulson observes. “And you don’t scare easy.”

“He’s a very dangerous man.”

She wants him to take her in—apparently, Whitehall isn’t the forgiving type. But Hunter tags Raina with a tracker in her thigh instead, and Coulson only shrugs in response to her complaints.

“Whitehall will be looking for you. Whether we’re there to save you when he does, that’s your call. You can start by telling me where to find Skye’s father.”

Skye has her phone out already, and she punches in the address as Raina rattles it off. It’s only a few blocks away.

She takes a deep breath, backs slowly away from May, then spins and races out the kitchen door.

**May:**

She walks in on Skye looking down at a framed picture on the floor in the middle of a decrepit halfway-house of an office. She shares a look with Coulson, telling him *you saw her first*, before moving past him with Hunter to clear the rest of the apartment. When she gets to the back room, she smells it before she sees it. And as she flips on the light and sees the source of the metallic scent soaking the floor, May bites her tongue and tries to block out the phrase that Coulson had just brought up again.

*Wherever she goes, death follows.*

*And apparently, he was just here.*

There’s no way to hide the scene from Skye, or the rest of the team for that matter. If Skye is horrified by the pair of corpses on the floor, she masks it well.

“Looks like a small blade, probably a scalpel,” May observes from the first body, unable to look at Skye as she talks. “And this—“ she gestures to the other man’s broken neck and askew limbs “—was just pure strength. Whoever did this—“

“We all know who did this,” Skye interrupts quietly, looking around at the carnage. “Look at what he did. He’s a monster.”

She doesn’t say another word before they all walk out, heading back to the place where things are safer. May falls in step beside Skye and grips her hand as they leave the massacre behind. She’s told Skye they shouldn’t do that in the field—but this isn’t the field anymore.

This is a crime scene. And now it’s personal.

She wants Skye in the co-pilot’s seat beside her as they fly back, if only to have her in sight and know that she’s okay, but Coulson sticks close to her in the jump seat area, and May spends the flight trying to figure out what she and Skye are going to talk about first whenever they get back to base.

But Skye bolts as soon as they land, and May lets her go, radioing through the plane to Trip, asking for an update on Simmons and Morse’s extraction. They’re inbound, so May lingers with Coulson in the lower levels until the three of them stroll in. She nods a greeting at Bobbi and brushes a hand over Simmons’s shoulder as she goes into the lab to see Fitz, smirks at the encounter between Hunter and Bobbi, but it’s all with a heaviness in her chest, waiting to see when and where Skye will surface. In the end, it’s Coulson who sends her a message.
She’s up here.

May pockets her phone and moves towards the stairs.

Skye:

She lingers in Coulson’s office, still staring at the cryptic symbols dug into the wall, taking pictures on her phone and dragging her fingers over the shapes that she’s finally seeing in real life. She knows that after a few minutes of this, she’s only stalling, so she’s not even surprised when someone knocks on the door, and Coulson opens it to reveal May on the other side.

Skye doesn’t feel angry anymore, but she goes back to looking at the carvings, wanting to talk but having no idea where to start.

“Before I leave,” Coulson says, stepping back to let May in and shutting the door after her, “I want you to hear from me, Skye, that I ordered May not to tell you any of the things you found out today. If you want to be mad at someone, you can be mad at me. But she was obeying orders, and you shouldn’t fault her for that.”

Skye finally turns around, folding her arms over her chest. She and the two older agents form a tall, silent isosceles, the two of them apparently waiting for her to respond. The situation feels a little bit like when she was younger and May suddenly turned up in New York after months following years of absence—Skye could tell she had expected her to be mad, so she’d decided that she might as well be. Thankfully, Skye’s a little older and wiser now, and she can let this be her loss today.

Pursing her lips, Skye nods. “I understand,” she says, glancing at Coulson. “I am mad at you, just so you know. I might be for a little while.”

“That’s fair,” he concedes. “But unless I say otherwise, you still need to keep this information secret from the others in the base.”

She nods again. “Fine.”

The other agents don’t need the same reasons as her to doubt their director.

“All right,” Coulson says with a nod, moving towards the door. “I recommend you two don’t leave the office until you’ve hashed everything out.” He opens the door. “Goodnight.”

The door closes again, and they’re alone.

May faces her in the half-light, waiting, and Skye finally sighs.

“I’m sorry,” she says, uncrossing her arms and twisting her fingers together. “For the things I said this afternoon. You didn’t deserve that, and I’m sorry.”

May nods, accepting. “I’m sorry you had to find out the way you did.”

Skye sighs and looks down. “I don’t know how you expected me to react to that information no matter how I heard it—there probably wasn’t a good way for this to happen.”

“Maybe not,” May says, shrugging. “But anything would have been better than hearing it from Ward.”

They pause for a moment, and Skye replays the events of the hell of a day, thinking about all the situations she’s now faced with.
“So after what you saw tonight…” May finally says, meeting her eyes. “What do you want to do?”

Skye looks away, folding her arms around herself again.

“I told Coulson I’m with you all one hundred percent,” she says firmly. “Even if he is my real father, I don’t care. He’s not my family—this team is. And I’m staying on your side no matter what.”

May nods, looking relieved. “I’m glad to hear that. Except you do.”

Skye looks up at her, confused.

“You do care that he exists,” May says, holding her gaze. “I know you do. And that’s okay.”

She shakes her head slowly, thinking of the picture she had left on the floor of that house. The person in the photo might have once been a man who grinned as he held his baby daughter, but now he’s the person who left two bodies along with that photo.

“I don’t want to know him, May,” she says in barely a whisper. “I don’t care how long he’s been looking for me. What he did tonight, what he’s been doing is…”

“Unforgivable,” May finishes for her, and Skye nods.

There’s another beat of silence, then May is moving slowly across the room until she’s standing within arm’s reach of Skye.

“We don’t have to have all the answers right now. But we need to be on the same page.”

“I’m taking care of my family,” Skye repeats. “You and this team. I won’t turn my back on you all.”

May nods, and then holds out her hands to Skye, who walks willingly into her embrace. May’s arms wrap around her, strong and safe.

“I love you,” May whispers. “Nothing you could do or learn could make me love you less.”

Skye is unprepared for the flood of tears that those words bring to her eyes, so she buries her face in May’s neck and holds on until she trusts herself to speak again.

“Even if I turn out to be some alien in human skin?” she attempts, and May huffs out a laugh against her.

“Even if you grew a tail and gills and turned blue,” she reassures her, and Skye can hear that she’s smiling.

Skye pulls herself together, then draws back so that she can kiss May once, a relieved kiss that still has a little bit of trembling left in it. When she pulls away, May is still holding onto her, eyes concerned.

“I love you too,” Skye says quickly, realizing that she forgot to say it back. “I always will.”

May smiles and smooths a gentle hand over her cheek, then steps back, keeping one arm around Skye’s waist.

“Let’s go downstairs, then,” she says, walking side by side with Skye towards the door. “The family’s waiting.”

“For the record,” Skye says as they make their way down the hall, “I would be perfectly happy for
you to slam me up against a wall under other circumstances.”

"I'll remember that," May says, and Skye smiles.

May:

She watches Skye race into a hug with Simmons when they finally catch sight of each other, clinging to her with relief so evident it seems to be bleeding through her skin. Once the two of them get their words going, stories come tumbling out at a mile a minute, and May catches Simmons’ eye with a small smile as she moves past them both into the kitchen where Bobbi is still chatting with Mack, half-full tumblers of something clear in their hands. Bobbi catches May’s eye grins at her as she approaches, pulling down a third glass without prompting and holding it out to Mack.

“Mack, treat her right,” she orders, reaching out to catch May with an arm around her shoulders and pull her into a half-hug. May tolerates it for a little longer than she used to—Bobbi’s always been more openly affectionate than anyone she knows, but May hasn’t always been the kind to enjoy it much (that only changed recently).

“How are you feeling?” she asks when Bobbi lets her go and she can back away to a distance where she doesn’t have to crane her neck to look at the younger woman’s face. “Post-op crash hitting yet?”

Bobbi shrugs with one shoulder and takes another drink. “My goal is to be in a pleasant state of inebriation by the time it does, so come on and join the fun.”

Mack passes her a glass with four fingers of gin in it, and May accepts it readily.

Hell of a day.

“Hunter slink off to sulk somewhere else for now?” she asks, directing her question at both Bobbi and Mack, who smirk at one another.

“Yeah, he probably thinks he can find someone sympathetic somewhere on this base if he digs hard enough,” Mack says with tired amusement, swirling the drink in his glass. “Problem is, everyone’s about to meet Bobbi, and then no one’s going to take his side.”

“Let me guess,” Bobbi says, leaning back against the counter and closing her eyes. “He’s been telling everyone I’m the spawn of Satan, a lying bitch, a psychopath with way too many secrets, the worst thing that ever happened to him…did I miss any other titles?”

“Demonic hell-beast,” May supplies, and Bobbi opens her eyes, pointing at her proudly.

“Demonic hell-beast! Forgot about that one.”

The alcohol is taking the edge of the day finally, and May feels her shoulders relaxing for the first time since Raina called this afternoon.

“You should be proud of Agent Simmons,” Bobbi says with a smile, nodding at the girl, still in the middle of a rapid conversation with Skye on the nearby sofa. “I asked her on the plane how she had prepared for her time undercover, and she said you gave her some pre-field training throughout the spring. She was clearly terrified a lot of the time, but she handled herself well.”

“She’s something special,” May agrees, noting the way Mack’s gaze shifts away and wondering what Fitz has said about Simmons in her absence.

“So’s that one, apparently,” Bobbi says with a knowing look at Skye. “How long have you guys
been together?"

May glances down, almost snorting into her glass. This is the part she always forgets about Bobbi “Mockingbird” Morse—just how far her powers of observation can stretch.

“Come on, Agent May, don’t leave me hanging,” Bobbi teases, extending one very long leg and prodding May’s calf with her toe. “Tell me all about her.”

May glances back at Skye, who seems to feel her gaze and looks at her briefly over Simmons’s shoulder, a smile lingering on her lips. She’s used to the warmth that glows in her chest whenever their eyes meet now, but sometimes it still surprises her how easily Skye can make her smile back.

In her periphery, she can see Bobbi’s grin widen.

“Okay, this,” she says, gesturing between May and Skye with the hand that’s holding her glass, “this is my new favorite thing. Mel, I’m so happy for you!”

“You just called Agent May ‘Mel’, Bobbi,” Mack says, looking slightly alarmed. “Maybe you should cut yourself off.”

“It’s still less dangerous than calling her The Cavalry, I’ve heard,” Bobbi says, and May’s eyes flick back to hers, a warning in her gaze as she tramps down on the memories that those words always slingshot to the surface. Bobbi’s eyes immediately soften apologetically, and she catches the bottle off the counter, holding it out like a peace offering between them.

“It’s good to see you again, May,” Bobbi says gently, her eyes soft. “I’ve missed you.”

May takes the bottle and pours herself another glass.

Skye:

It’s well after midnight when Jemma finally runs out of stories and is finally coming down from her adrenaline high, yawning widely on the sofa. Skye walks back to her old room with her to help her change the sheets on her bed. It’s late enough that the halls are empty, which is probably why Jemma chooses then to ask her question.

“Everything is still good with May?” Jemma asks around another yawn, leaning heavily on Skye’s arm as they walk through the now-deserted halls.

“I think so,” Skye answers, smiling to herself. After their conversation upstairs, she feels a whole lot better about things than she had this morning.

“Glad,” Jemma hums, turning the corner with her onto the women’s barracks hall. “Happy for you two.”

“Thanks,” Skye replies, unable to make herself bring up Fitz and how that conversation went earlier.

Jemma doesn’t need that tonight.

Jemma’s bunk smells stale as they walk in together, and there is a thin layer of dust on everything. Skye gets a stack of bedding from the closet on the hall and helps Jemma change the sheets, laughing as clouds of dust fill the air and make them both sneeze one after the other.

“Maybe you could crack a window?” Skye suggests, glancing at the solid brick walls.

“Well, I’d sleep with the door open if you and May weren’t still right across the hall,” Jemma jokes,
wiping a hand towel over the layer of dust on her dresser. She sneezes again, but Skye can only stare at her, alarmed.

“Jemma! You never—did you—are we loud?” she stammers out, feeling her cheeks flush red.

Jemma at least seems amused at Skye’s discomfort, smiling knowingly. “You’re not the worst neighbors I’ve had,” she says ambiguously. “My suitemate at the Academy must have had her boyfriend over six nights a week…at least they would usually take a night off on Tuesdays…”

“Jemma!” Skye squeaks again, pressing her hands to her cheeks. “Why didn’t you say something?”

But her friend only laughs to herself, dropping the dusty towel on the pile of old sheets before grabbing the load up into her arms.

“It was only once or twice, I promise,” she says sincerely, flashing a grin. “It’s just nice to see someone else more embarrassed than myself for a change. Is the laundry room still in the same place?”

Skye smiles as she nods, opening the door for Jemma and following her out and down the hallway. “I think I can get used to this New Jemma,” she teases. “Do I have Hydra to thank for this?”

“Don’t even joke about that,” Jemma mutters, shaking her head.

May is just making her way down the halls to their room when Skye and Jemma come back, and Jemma says goodnight to them both with something like a smirk on her face. Skye scrunches up her nose at her but still can't help smiling. It’s good to have Simmons back.

They don’t say much as they get ready for bed, but when they finally turn out the lights and settle down, May rolls towards her and brushes a had over Skye’s arm.

“It’ll be good to have everyone back,” she murmurs, and Skye hums in agreement.

“Nice to have everyone under one roof again.”

There’s a quiet beat of silence before May suddenly asks, “Why didn’t you tell me that Ward was trying to tell you things about your father?”

The question catches Skye off-guard, and she guesses she has the alcohol to thank for May’s bluntness.

“Because it was never something I believed before today,” she answers, rolling on her side to face May in the darkness. “I was certain that he was just trying to play an angle. I never imagined that it was real…”

In the darkness, May’s hand slips around her, tugging her closer until she’s pressed against May’s chest beneath her chin.

“You don’t have to tell me everything,” May murmurs, combing a hand through her hair. “But I hope you’ll never be afraid to tell me something like that. Even if the possibilities are terrifying. I’m good at keeping secrets.”

Coulson.

Simmons.

Time-travel.
Bahrain.

Holding onto hot coals so that they don’t burn anyone else.

“I know,” Skye whispers, relaxing into the warmth of the embrace. “But you shouldn’t have to carry anything that isn’t yours.”

“That’s what you do when you love someone,” May reminds her, brushing her lips over Skye’s forehead.

Skye tightens her grip around May in the darkness, focusing on the love throbbing in her chest so she won’t think about the gaping unknowns looming ahead of them after everything she’s learned today.

Coulson is losing grip. He might be slowly becoming the psychopath Garrett became...

You have alien DNA...or something else crazy that is keeping you from becoming the same thing...

The carvings are a map...there’s something important to be found...

Hydra wants the Obelisk, maybe for the same reason...

Your father’s alive. He’s a murderer. And he’s looking for you...

“I love you too,” she whispers. It may not be the question May was asking, but she wants it to be the answer. “Whatever happens, I promise, May, in all times and places, I love you.”

Chapter End Notes

Got a little sappier at the end than I had originally planned, but some of those lines will be surfacing again. Stay tuned.
December 1, 2014: May is 45, Skye is 25

They don’t even get a week as a consolidated team before Hydra rears one of its ugly heads again and they are all flung back into action. Hydra (dressed as SHIELD) attacks the UN with weapons from a Japanese Hydra agent that Bobbi has connections with, and she, May, and Hunter are assigned to track him down.

May, of course, would prefer literally any other team for this mission, as long as it’s not Loud and Louder that she’s stuck in a plane with for eight hours across the Pacific, and she lets Coulson know her opinion as soon as he tells her the assignment.

“Hunter is not the only specialist you could be sending right now,” May says, refusing to let herself plead but wishing to god she had less pride so that she could. “You know exactly how putting him and Bobbi together is going to go.”

“I have no doubt that sending three women to get the job done would probably go more smoothly than literally any mission with Hunter,” Coulson agrees, hastily throwing papers into a briefcase. “But I’m about to go meet a US Senator that shares a last name with our prisoner, and if it goes how I’m guessing it will turn out, I’m going to need Skye here to get intel from Ward one last time.”

“Last?” May repeats, but Coulson ignores her.

“Try to get the two of them back from Japan without letting them kill each other, all right?” he requests, throwing some gadgets from his desk into his briefcase. “I’ll make sure and keep you up to date with everything that’s happening here.”

Skye is more than a little upset when May tells her the plan on the way back to their room to hastily pack a bag. May repeats all the same reasons Coulson gave her, which makes Skye even less excited.

“I will be thrilled if this were the last time I ever have to speak to Ward,” she groans, slumping down on their bed as May throws clothes into a duffle, “but it still feels like a stupid reason to split us up. Couldn’t Trip fly this mission?”

“I think Coulson’s afraid Trip would eject Hunter out of the plane before they made it to Japan,”
May mutters.

“What if you time-travel?” Skye asks, true concern in her voice. “Bobbi and Hunter don’t know yet —”

“If that happens, then they will know, and I’ll deal with it,” May answers, glancing up with an attempt at a reassuring look. “We need to get ahead of the next attack, Skye. This was bound to happen sooner or later.”

Skye nods, glancing away and looking defeated. This will be the first time they’ve been separated for more than a few hours in almost a year, May realizes. She’s no more thrilled about it than Skye is, but the girl is just far more willing to show it.

“You should take this with you,” Skye says suddenly, reaching over and pulling the dreamcatcher off the wall above their headboard, where it has hung since they first moved into this room together. “Just in case.”

May takes it with a smile and tucks it between the shirts in her bag before zipping the top and throwing the duffle over her shoulder.

“Walk out with me,” she says, holding a hand out to Skye, who takes it and follows her without hesitation, just like she always has.

May doesn’t drop her hand all the way through the base out to the hangar—if anyone hasn’t noticed they’re together by now, it’s really not her problem. At the base of the quinjet’s ramp, she turns to Skye and pulls her into a kiss that lasts long enough for Hunter to stomp past them and make it all the way up the ramp.

“Still weird!” he calls down in their direction once he’s a safe distance away from them. May ignores him as she pulls back, moving her hands to grip Skye’s shoulders.

“Take care of the team here, okay?” she commissions her student. “And keep an eye on Coulson—don’t let him carve by himself,” she requests from her friend.

Skye nods seriously, and May leans in to kiss her quickly once again, wrapping one hand around the back of Skye’s neck, possessive and protective.

“I love you,” she whispers to her girlfriend, lingering close enough that she can feel Skye’s warmth radiating into her. “I’ll see you soon.”

Skye nods once, stepping away, and May turns to move quickly up the ramp of the quinjet before the goodbye can get harder. This should be a shorter separation than any of the ones Skye experienced growing up, but May hates this almost as much as every time she’s said goodbye to a child version of Skye.

A few nights ago, she had suddenly been dropped back into 2013 on their Bus on the day that metal objects had been floating around Simmons, and she had watched with a pained expression while her younger self obstinately bit out excuses about why Skye wasn’t worth the risk. Remembering what Skye had told her about seeing her that day, she’d snuck into Skye’s bunk when the drama was all over, holding her apologetically and reassuring the girl that all her younger self needed was for Skye to not give up on her. She’d kissed her goodbye, withheld the three words that she knew Skye would hear from her eventually, and then said the same four that she’d said at the end of so many visits before dropping back into 2014 where Skye was too, pulling her back and not even knowing it.

Now, she boards a different plane with different teammates and from the top of the ramp, she looks
back and waves at the girl who has changed so much before her very eyes. This goodbye feels
different—it’s the first time the imminent separation been only geographic and not chronologic. She
doesn’t know if she can say that she’s thankful for the chaos that’s brought them to this point, but she
wouldn’t have it any other way.

December 2, 2014

Skye:

“He agreed to the exchange,” Coulson tells her when they’re alone in his office, and Skye nods
gravely.

“When does he want him by?” she asks, trying to fit her head around it.

Ward’s going to be gone. He’s finally going to go on trial and pay for his crimes like he deserves.
You’ll never have to see him again…

“Tonight,” Coulson says, and Skye nods again. “So if you want to talk to him about…any last-
minute matters you think he knows something about…now’s the time.”

She looks over at him and sees the knowing look in his eyes. “I know you want to know more,” he
says, “and that’s all right. This may be your last chance to hear anything he has to say.”

She looks away, biting her lip.

“Do I have time to talk to May first?”

She answers on the second ring, and Skye can tell she’s still airborne. “How’s everything there?”
May asks into her headset, and Skye is amazed by the relief that seeps through her just from the
sound of May’s voice.

“Tense,” she answers honestly. “Coulson says this is my last chance to talk to Ward.”

“Are you going to ask about your father?” May asks next, and Skye looks down at the desk where
Coulson has carved a few more “sketches” this week.

“I want to, and I don’t want to,” she says honestly, hoping that May can understand that.

“You can’t put a genie back in the bottle,” May says with a sigh. “But sometimes knowing the worst
is still better than the worst you can imagine.”

Skye’s hands go still on the etchings in the desk. She’s certain that she has never used those words in
front of May.

She takes this as her sign and knows what she has to do.

She listens to his warnings about Senator Ward with a thick filter over all the fear he’s trying to act
out in front of her.

“I’m telling you the truth. You see that now, don’t you?” he insists. “I never lied about your father.
You just didn’t give me the chance to tell you.”

“No,” she says slowly, forcing a mask of concern over her disgust. “But I’m giving you the chance
now. And I want to now everything.”
She can see all his moves, now that she’s been trained to notice them. The appeal to her compassion, the way he makes things look like she’s in control, the projection of knowledge and responsibility that he tries to reassure her with…

It almost makes her want to gag. But she knows what part he wants to see too, so she plays along.

“Your father killed people, yes. But everything he did, Skye, he did because he loved you. I can’t fault him for that. The people who died in the Hunan province weren’t villagers. They were HYDRA agents. They’d found you and your mother.”

“My mother?” the words slip out breathlessly, and she’s afraid that suddenly she may not be faking her excitement. “Is she alive too?”

“No,” he says with a shake of his head. “They killed her.”

The jab of pain in her chest surprises her, but she lets him see it, knowing he’ll be glad of it. “Why?”

“I don’t know,” he says, sounding sad. “But when your father got there, he lost it. Tore up the whole village and everyone in it.”

“How? What is he?”

*What kind of creature breaks arms and legs and backs and leaves hundreds dead behind him?*

*What kind of DNA am I carrying?*

“Whatever he is, he lost his whole family in one day, and he cracked. But now he wants to put that family back together, and I can help with that. I can take you to him.”

“How? Where is he?”

*Come on Ward, just tell me and then we can be done with this…*

“I’ve got connections. People I can talk to—“

*You lying snake.*


“I’m resourceful.”

“Then tell me what you know. Isn’t there anything else? Please, Ward.”

She hates that she can see how much he likes hearing her say his name.

“No. We can find him. Together. I promise you.”

She exhales and finally lets herself drop the act.

“Thank you for telling me everything you know. It’s time we get you out of here.” She barely blinks, wanting to savor the look of betrayal that unfolds on his face at her next words. “You’re being transferred. Your brother wants you in his custody. And we’re going to give him exactly what he wants.”

A few hours later, she stands in a doorway with Jemma and watches Coulson and five armed guards walk him out to the garage in shackles. She feels herself reaching for Jemma’s hand, wishing May
was here to stand beside her, but Skye catches herself and folds her arms over her chest instead.

“Skye,” Ward says when he sees her, his voice pleading.

Before she can respond though, Jemma steps directly in front of her, blocking him completely from her sight.

“If I ever see you again,” her friend promises in a voice that does not tremble, “I’ll kill you.”

And then he’s gone, and Skye doesn’t stop herself this time from reaching over and catching Jemma’s hand in hers.

“Thank you,” she whispers before her throat closes up, and Jemma smiles back at her sadly.

“May’s not the only one who cares about you,” she reminds her, squeezing her hand gently. “Don’t forget that, yeah?”

December 3-7, 2014

May:

She’s really not all that surprised that Ward escapes, but that doesn’t make her any less furious.

She calls Skye through the plane’s systems once they get airborne over Belgium and headed back towards America, but there’s really not much comforting that can be done.

“Keep an eye on Coulson,” May reminds her as the Atlantic zips beneath their jet. “We’ll be back as soon as we find Ward.”

“Stay safe,” Skye responds, the heaviness tangible even across the miles. “I love you.”

“Love you too,” May whispers back, then ends the call without a goodbye.

Trip is already on the ground in America with some other agents chasing Ward’s trail up the east coast, and May gets over them as air support before the trail goes cold. Ward is smart and immediately putting his threats into full effect as soon as he has the resources to do it, strapping a suicide bomb around himself as insurance, so they hang back and tail him through Pennsylvania to Atlanta, where he boards a bus with Hunter tailing him all the way back to Boston (really, Ward, now you’re just screwing with us). Hunter follows him to a seedy bar in the city and radios up to May with news of a rather alarming meet-up between Ward and the Hydra agent from Miami (Sunil Bakshi, according to Bobbi, who is back on the plane with her).

No one at base is answering her calls when Trip tries to update everyone, however, and May feels her heart rate climbing as she takes their plane down to join Hunter in Boston. Just before they land though, a call suddenly comes through.

“I’ve got Skye,” Trip announces, putting the call to May’s headset.

“Skye?” she says, relieved but not having much time. “We’ve got a Ward situation that’s about to get really bad for all of us.”

On the other side of the phone, Skye takes a deep breath. “Coulson went into the memory machine.”

That thing we’ve been holding onto since last year? The thing Raina tortured him with back in the
“What?! And you let him?” May doesn't even try to keep the horror out of her voice.

Skye sounds breathless and scared, and May can hear an echo of a little girl, terrified to disappoint. “It wasn’t my call.”

“Lock him up and keep him under observation until I get back,” May responds through gritted teeth, ending the call. They’re going to have to talk about this later, but she's not about to let Ward get away.

“What was that all about? Trip asks, glancing over at her with concern in his eyes. As May flips switches, taking them into a vertical descent a block away from the bar.

May only shakes her head, catching sight of Hunter's undercover car on the way down. “Let’s just stay focused.”

They end up leaving Boston with Bakshi instead of Ward, all tied up like a present in the back room with a tag over his mouth and everything: For Coulson.

Once again though, no one's answering as she radios into the base, and May stresses the whole flight back down the coast. Once they land, she only stresses more when she hears from Simmons about everything that’s happened, and she throws herself into another SUV, chasing after her agents.

She halfway to Skye and Coulson when the former suddenly calls in.

“May,” Skye exhales into the phone, sounding on the verge of tears. “It’s all right. Everything’s all right now. We’re coming home.”

Skye:

Coulson apologizes to her multiple times on the drive back to base, and Skye feels like she should be a little angrier at him, but all she can feel is relief. She can tell that Mack is more upset about the situation than her, but she hopes it will all blow over once Coulson talks to the entire team.

May is waiting in the garage when they get back, and Skye is very aware of how awful Coulson looks, climbing out of the car in a bloody t-shirt and missing his shoes. From the look on May’s face, she’s torn between punching him and hugging him, but in the end, her self-control seems to win out.

“Get to medical,” she orders, scowling at Coulson. “In an hour, you and I are having words in your office.”

He doesn’t seem afraid of her, but he goes without argument with Simmons to the medical wing, Mack moves off with the lapsed agent to brief him upstairs, and suddenly, she and May are alone in the hangar.

Unsure what to expect, Skye waits. After days apart, all she wants to do is throw her arms around May and never let go again, but after what she’s done today, she wonders if that would be welcome.

May gazes at her in silence for a long moment before sighing and turning away.

“I need a shower,” she grumbles, and Skye’s heart sinks, just until May adds, “Come on—you need one too.”
She catches up with May in the bathroom and locks the door behind them. May is already stripping down unceremoniously while the water warms in one shower, and Skye starts doing the same, following her into the steamy stall.

May’s already standing under the spray, but when Skye crowds in with her, she turns and slips her arms around Skye’s waist and pulls her into a gentle embrace where they’re both standing underneath the cascading warmth. Relieved, Skye finally exhales, hugging May to herself in silence as the water pours down on them, rinsing off the stress of the past week and her reservations with it. She’s taller when they’re both barefoot, so May’s chin barely clears her shoulder as she tips her head up and speaks.

“I’m not mad at you,” her girlfriend murmurs, her arms tightening reassuringly around Skye’s waist. “I know why you did what you did, and I know you still did your best to keep him safe.”

“I’m still sorry,” Skye murmurs back, pressing her forehead against May’s damp hair. “I almost lost him…”

“But you didn’t,” May reminds her, leaning back to look Skye in the eye. “You did good.”

Skye kisses her and does her best to believe it.

Later, clean and relaxed and bundled up in fresh clothes, Skye sits on the bed while May weaves her damp hair into a braid.

“Feel better?” May asks after tying off the braid at the bottom and wrapping her arms around Skye’s shoulders, hugging her from behind. Skye hangs her hands from May’s arms and leans back into the touch, nodding.

“I missed you,” she whispers, relaxing further into May’s touch, feeling the reassuring tempo of May’s heartbeat against her body.

“I missed you too,” May returns, pressing a kiss against Skye’s hair. “I promise later, I’ll show you how much. For now though, you and I need to go hear an apology from someone who may have walked all over my last nerve this week.”

Skye smiles for more than one reason, opening her eyes. “Let’s do it, she says, catching May’s hand so that they can walk out of the room together.

Coulson apologizes to both of them and assures them that the carving compulsion is gone. Their team looks at the map of the city and starts making a plan, united in direction at last. But Skye’s alone in Coulson’s office though when Ward calls in on Bakshi’s phone asking if the team got his gift.

“I’ll see you soon, Skye,” he says before hanging up. “I promise.”

December 10, 2014

May:

She could have fought harder for Coulson to not split her and Skye up again so soon after their last mission, but it might have still ended the same. She’s stuck babysitting the base and the rest of the team while he takes Skye, Fitz, and Trip with a small team and the Bus to Hawaii (one of her favorite places on the planet) on the mission to get access to the satellites that might let them see the
city if it exists anywhere on earth. He needs Skye to organize the hack, and he needs May to be in charge.

Of course, this means she’s still stuck with Hunter and Bobbi and their constant needling, but the presence of Mack and Simmons seems more mediating than her efforts to diffuse their conflicts have been so far. Coulson had suggested that Bobbi interrogate Bakshi sooner rather than later, and it was only then that May had remembered what information that particular Hydra agent certainly knew.

“He’s the one who tortured me back in Miami. He saw me disappear,” she reminds Coulson after he briefs her on the mission. “He might use that as a bargaining chip with us.”

“Well, unless you want to go ahead and tell the whole base, I guess that means that you need to at least brief Bobbi, since she’s the one who would need to cover for you.”

May had looked away, contemplating her options. She doesn’t really have much of a choice—putting the truth in Bobbi’s hands feels risky, but the two of them go back far enough that May trusts her to protect a secret if she asked her to.

Bobbi, surprisingly, had taken it better than expected.

“I’m going to tell you something confidential,” she had opened without ceremony once she and Bobbi were alone in her bunk, Bobbi seated on her bed and May standing, trying not to look nervous. “But I’m first going to need your word that you won’t pass this information on to anyone else. Anyone.”

“Then before you tell me, I’d like to know why you’re telling me…whatever you’re about to tell me,” Bobbi had said at first, obviously confused but clearly willing to listen.

“Because I’m about to send you down to interrogate a man who at the moment knows a tiny bit more about this than you do,” May had replied, folding her arms across her chest, “and I don’t want him to surprise you with anything while the two of you are on camera.”

Bobbi’s brow furrowed, but she nodded. “Okay, lay it on me then,” she had prompted, leaning back on one hand.

May glanced at the dreamcatcher, back in its place over her bed, and took a deep breath. “Sometimes, I time-travel.”

The explanation was awkward and circuitous, and May had tried to avoid any unnecessary tangents, but Bobbi still seemed more than a little overwhelmed before she got to the end.

“May, I can’t think of a reason why you’d be telling me something as crazy as this if it weren’t true,” Bobbi had finally responded when May stopped talking, “but I am having a pretty hard time believing this.”

“You don’t have to believe it,” May had said with a shake of her head. “You just have to keep it a secret and not let Bakshi try to use it against you. I get the feeling he might make some threat about Hydra coming after assets with gifts, and if he sees that he’s got any info that you don’t, he could end up telling everyone…anyone watching the cameras, at least.”

Bobbi shook her head again. “All right,” she said, getting to her feet. “So you time-travel. Disappear out of your clothes and return the same way. Uncontrollable and unexplainable. Not a gift so much as an inconvenience. Started after Bahrain. Coulson, Skye, and Simmons know, but no one else around here, and it needs to stay that way. Anything else I should know?”
It had been almost painful to hear one of the biggest secrets of her life spelled out so clinically like that, but it was the long and short of it, and probably more than Bobbi needed to know.

“That’s it,” May had replied. “Don’t let him say much about anything he saw in Miami.”

“Will do,” Bobbi had promised, passing her on the way to the door.

Bakshi doesn’t speak for the first eight hours of the interrogation, but Bobbi is in her element, slowly chipping away at his resolve and patience the longer the two of them sit there. May has been waiting for him to pull out his knowledge of her as a bargaining chip, but she can tell that Bobbi is steering the conversation, not giving him an in to bring up anything not directly related to himself or other heads of Hydra. When he finally starts talking, it’s about Whitehall.

“Whitehall is a disciple of Red Skull, shared his vision. Cut off one head and—”

“Two will take its place, yes, yes,” Bobbi finishes boredly. “Hell I’ll hand you the sword if it will get you the gig of running the show.”

“Whitehall will see your friends turn to stone,” Bakshi sneers at her. “Those that haven’t already.”

Even from the grainy security monitor, May can see Bobbi gritting her teeth, and she realizes that someone—probably Hunter, must have told her exactly how Hartley died.

“I’m wondering, however,” Bakshi says, leaning forward in his chair, “how much you actually know about your teammates, particularly Agent May.”

Bobbi smiles coolly, “A lot more than you, I am certain,” she says calmly.

May smirks to herself.

That’s my girl.

“Whitehall has always had a special interest in those with abilities,” Bakshi says, his dark eyes calculating, “and now we know that not only is your organization an insistent nuisance to our operations, but you are also harboring at least one such person. How long do you think you can hold out against us? So far, you haven’t been too successful at protecting your own.”

“I don’t know,” Bobbi says, her projected ease so convincing that it’s almost unsettling. “I seem to remember taking down you and your guards easily enough when it was time to get Agent Simmons home safely.”

“You think your flimsy organization is a worthy opponent of Hydra?” Bakshi sneers, staring her down. “You are a paper stage set. A fragile barrier trying to give the illusion of strength. From what I’ve seen, you have a handful of people, a laughable amount of resources—”

“Oh, honey,” Bobbi says, shaking her head and smiling condescendingly as she gets to her feet. “You haven’t even scratched the surface yet.”

May lets out a sigh as Bobbi exits the secured room and leaves Bakshi sitting alone with his demons. She hears the woman trudging up the basement stairs underneath the camera, so she leaves Coulson’s office and tramps down a level to meet her in the middle. As she clears the landing, though, she finds Hunter leaning against the common room table, arms folded as he stares at the bay of monitors. He looks over as she comes in, raising an eyebrow.

“So Agent May, what exactly don’t we know about you?” he asks calmly, but there is a challenge in
his eyes.

You should have thought about this, May realizes, forcing her expression to remain neutral. You should have remembered that there were monitors down there too, that anyone could have been watching...should have set a program to redirect the footage to Coulson’s office alone...at the very least, you should have prepared some kind of explanation in case this happened...

Bobbi comes striding into the room, takes one look at her and Hunter, and rolls her eyes.

“God, Hunter, you’re looking at her like you believed what he said,” she grumbles, going to the fridge and fishing out a bottle of water. “Come on, he’s still blowing smoke. We haven’t gotten to the good stuff yet.”

May glances at Bobbi gratefully and leaves the room immediately.

Later, she leads the search down into the basement to look for old SSR files, and the pieces start falling together when they pull out a photo of Werner Reinhardt.

“That’s Daniel Whitehall,” Simmons says certainly, gazing at the photo, appalled.

It’s impossible. They all know it’s impossible. But she and the scientist share a glance over the photo, and May is glad Simmons knows better than to call anything impossible now.

Later, May watches from the monitors in Coulson’s office as Bobbi throws the file down like the trump card that it is.

“You gave us everything on Whitehall. His true name, his history, his age...did you know he’s hypertensive? We do.”

Bobbi stands up and rounds the table, leaning over him.

“I know that he gave you a second chance, now do you think he’s going to give you a third when you tell us how to kill him? You failed your boss, Mr. Bakshi. I know who Whitehall is. The question remains, what kind of a man are you?”

Bakshi is trembling, but he looks resolved as he glares up at Bobbi. “A loyal one.”

Those are the last words he says before he hurls himself against the table face-first, and May actually jumps to her feet, startled. Bakshi collapses to the floor, foam bubbling out of his mouth, and she immediately realizes what he’s done.

For some reason, all she can feel is relieved.

Skye:

Coulson’s got her standing by with the Geek Squad on the bus while he, Fitz, and Trip go into the server warehouse in Australia to plant their transceiver. She reports through their comms that Kaena point is down and they have six minutes to install the device, and that’s the last thing she hears over comms for ten long minutes. The device eventually goes live, and she starts running the hack of the global satellite network, but her heart skips a few beats when the comms frequency suddenly crackles to life.

“Skye!” Fitz’s voice carries over the fuzzy radio. “We’re-ah, we’re coming out!”
“Are you guys okay?” she demands, wondering why Coulson isn’t talking to her. “Is everyone—“

“Ah, we’re moving a little slowly. Trip was shot.”

“Oh my god—by who?! Is he okay?”

“He’s alive,” Fitz says quickly. “Ah, Hydra was there. We uh…we’ll explain when we get there. Coulson says to call in a trauma team to meet us in Alice Springs.”

Coulson is carrying Trip over his shoulder in a fireman’s hold when Skye finally sees them approaching, and thankfully one of the other agents is certified to fly the Bus because no ambulance will be getting out to the middle of the Australian outback anytime soon. Skye lets the geek squad supervise the satellite hack while she and Fitz stay with Trip. There are still a few units of blood in cold storage in the area that used to be the lab, and Coulson starts a transfusion in Trip’s arm as soon as they’re airborne. They’re so focused on Trip that it takes a little while for her to notice that neither Fitz or Coulson will look her in the eye.

Coulson goes with Trip in the ambulance to surgery once they land in Alice Springs, and she tries to finally get the full story out of Fitz but he mutters something about needing to change clothes and disappears…for the next three hours.

Coulson finally calls in and says that the surgery was successful but they’ll need to stay here at least a few more hours until Trip is safe to transport, and Skye updates him on the program’s progress.

A few hours later, he’s back on the plane. The program finds the city.

And then he tells her who else he saw in the server base.

May:

She’s been unable to let go of her phone since Coulson called her from Alice Springs to tell her what happened, but she still hasn’t been able to dial Skye’s number. She has no idea what she’d even say.

Bakshi is stable but under sedation for now. He’ll live, but they aren’t sure what to do with him. Bobbi and Hunter had floated separately back through the common room this evening looking equal parts smug and guilty, and May has used that as her reason to stay up in Coulson’s office while she waits for more information and does…nothing.

*Come on, Melinda. You’re not this person. You aren’t this kind of coward. You’ve got to say something eventually.*

Exhaling slowly, May unlocks her phone and opens a new message.

Coulson told me what happened. You okay?

It takes a few minutes for Skye to reply, and at least it’s honest.

**I don’t know.**

May purses her lips. Another two messages from Skye quickly pop up.

* Coulson says He’s planning to see me, but he didn’t say how or when.

**I don’t know if I’m more disgusted, furious, or afraid.**
Something hot and angry flickers to life in May’s chest, scorching her because it has no one else to burn.

*You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to.*

*We won’t let anyone take you away.*

*I know.*

*Thanks.*

*I wish you were here for so many reasons.*

May smiles sadly at the screen.

*I miss you too. Come home safe.*

*I love you.*

*Love you too. I’ll see you soon.*

She makes herself stand at last once she sees Skye’s phone go offline, unfolding herself from the position she’s sat too long in on Coulson’s sofa. The night outside the windows is softened by orange-tinted clouds, another storm rolling in from the west. Her stomach growls, reminding her that she hasn’t eaten since breakfast, and she locks up Coulson’s office before making her way downstairs to the kitchen. Bobbi is talking to Hunter with a little more friendliness than before, Simmons is lingering awkwardly in the periphery of Mack and Fitz’s conversation, and life is going on like Skye’s world hasn’t been turned upside down.

Above their base, distant thunder rumbles. May doesn’t know when the storm will hit, or what form it’s going to take, but she knows that for Skye’s sake, she has to be ready when it does.

Chapter End Notes

I’m planning to have just one more chapter to finish out season 2a...stay tuned and send cookies.
Countdown, I

Chapter Summary

2a finale on the rocks with a twist

Chapter Notes

[Panic emoji] Eeeeeeeeee ok big chapter here, guys--finishing out 2a! The world's about to shift for everyone, and I'm a little terrified for what's next. I'm probably going to take a little time off while I get the next few chapters worked up, but then I'll be back with the events of 2b (forget cookies; send tequila).

Get excited, we have a little canon divergence coming up...

Also if it matters to you, the first MayPOV section should probably be rated a little higher than Teen...just a heads up.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

December 13, 2014: Skye is 25, May is 45

She can’t find anyone.

The lights flicker on and off, the air is cold, and the halls are deserted as she races through the playground, barefoot on the stone floors.

“Hello?” she shouts, apparently to no one.

“May?

“Coulson?”

Her voice becomes more frantic, splintering as she yells louder.

“Where did everybody go?!”

...they left you they left you they left you they left you...

Through the empty halls, a distant tune echoes, soft, tinny chords of a music box turning.

What is that?

She peers through the lab windows and sees a music box sitting on a glowing light-table, and suddenly she’s on the other side of the glass and the box is right in front of her. It's metal and severe, not the kind of thing made for children, but Skye stares at the source of the music and feels that somehow, she recognizes it.
Like a dream of another dream…

She looks up to find Coulson suddenly there, holding a newspaper covered in Chinese characters and staring at the music box too.

“It opens,” he says, sounding a little amazed. “So weird, right?” He reaches for it.

“No!” Skye shouts, lunging across the table and knocking the box out of his reach…

And then she’s on the floor beside the opened box. There’s nothing inside. She stares at her scuffed knees and suddenly realizes that she’s wearing a flower dress.

Behind her, she hears the sound of a baby babbling and spins around on the floor, startled. Coulson is still there, but now his clothes are different—plaid shirt, belted jeans—and he’s holding a dark-haired baby in his arms. May suddenly materializes in the darkness over his shoulder, pulling on a lab coat over bare skin like she wasn’t expecting to find herself here and staring at the baby, alarmed.

“Get away from her!” she gasps, grabbing Coulson's shoulder before stepping around him and frantically pulling the baby into her own arms. “She’s dangerous.”

“May,” Skye says from the floor, but neither of them seems to hear her, “what are you doing?”

“If she’s dangerous, then you need to get out, too,” Coulson says, trying to tug May with him by the arm as he takes a step away.

“It’s too late,” May whispers, not looking at him as she wraps her arms around the baby and pulls it against her chest like she’s covering a grenade. “Sacrifices have to be made. This is how it has to happen.”

From the floor, Skye can see May’s bare feet suddenly turning to stone like Hartley’s hand when she touched the Obelisk…

“May!” she cries, scrambling towards her. “No!”

But the rest of May has already turned to stone, the baby still warm and alive but now encased in her petrified arms, and the second Skye’s hand meets her stony skin, the rock crumbles, and Skye screams for more than one reason, lunging into the pieces to catch the infant as it—as she—falls…

“Skye.”

Her heart is racing as she sits up with a gasp, dislodging a stack of printouts from beneath her elbow and spilling them off the Bus’s kitchenette table to the floor.

“Skye wake up,” Coulson repeats, his hand still light on her shoulder as Skye balls her trembling hands into fists. “We’re here.”

Outside the cabin windows, familiar light slants in.

*Playground.*

*Home.*

*May.*

Skye leaps to her feet and abandons her laptop, her printouts, pictures, and maps, and races through the plane down to the cargo hold. Trip is already being helped out to medical ahead of her, but she
sees May just past him, marching up the cargo ramp. They meet at the bottom of the staircase and Skye hurls herself into May’s arms.

May:

They don’t have time to waste. Hydra has the Obelisk and Skye’s father apparently helping them find their way to the city, and Coulson wants them prepped for the next mission in 24 hours. Everyone’s going, everyone’s helping, and a mission conference is blocked out for six the next morning before they board the plane and head for the underground city, which is located in Puerto Rico. The race against Hydra is on, and the clock is running.

But they’ve got one night.

Sleep would really be the wisest use of their time, but May doubts she’ll regret these stolen minutes, alone together at last in the midst of the chaos, crowding Skye against their locked bedroom door and pressing a heated kiss to her lips. On the other side of it, Skye seems equally urgent, fisting one hand in May’s hair and dragging the other down her back to yank at the hem of her shirt, pulling the garment ungracefully up until it bunches beneath May’s arms. She withdraws her hands, already busy beneath Skye’s shirt, and uses the pause to pull off both her shirt and bra, then pulls Skye by handfuls of t-shirt towards the bed.

“You really missed me, huh?” Skye whispers, smiling as she falls onto the mattress above May, hovering over her on her knees while she finally pulls her shirt off.

May just smiles as she slides her hands up Skye’s bare sides, pulls her into another kiss, and lets that be her answer.

They’ve done this enough times by now that they could be quick if they had to be. She knows exactly where to kiss, bite, and touch to make Skye shiver to pieces in minutes, and she has no doubt that Skye could do the same to her if she wanted (if she let her). But the clock isn’t ticking so loudly at the moment, and although she still feels the urgency in Skye’s fingers as they unfasten her jeans and tug them down until they land on the floor beside the bed, May knows this doesn’t have to be a record-setting evening.

“Slow down,” she whispers, catching Skye’s hands and lacing their fingers together, gently deflecting any attempts to reach for more clothes. “We’ve got time.”

“Yeah,” Skye agrees shakily, pausing above her with flushed cheeks. “You’re right.”

Something uncertain flickers in the backstage of Skye’s expression, though, and May won’t pretend like she didn’t see it.

“What is it?” she asks, hands falling to Skye’s sides to keep her from pulling away. Skye avoids her gaze as she kicks off her own jeans and leans down to kiss her again, but May doesn’t let herself be distracted.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, dodging the kiss and doing her best to catch Skye’s eye, hands smoothing reassuringly over her back. “Tell me.”

Face pressed against her neck, Skye sighs, then levers off May to land on the mattress beside her. May rocks over on her side to face her, keeping one hand against the girl’s skin like a safety line.

“I had an awful dream on the flight back,” Skye says after a few more seconds of silence, still
avoiding May’s gaze. “And I know dreams are just image mash-ups and usually have nothing to do with reality, but bad things happened, and I haven’t been able to shake this feeling all day that something bad is waiting for us on this mission. That something terrible is about to happen.”

“To you?” May prompts, fingers flexing gently around Skye’s skin.

“To all of us. But I’m most scared of it happening to you.”

Skye finally looks up at her, and May sees the fear now on full display. Heart heavy with compassion, May shifts closer, pulling Skye in until she’s pressed against her chest inside a strong embrace. Skye settles against her willingly enough, and May presses a kiss to the girl’s forehead before speaking.

“It’s always a possibility in our line of work,” she says sadly, brushing a gentle hand through Skye’s hair. “But I don’t think you need me to tell you that it’s a fact that will eat away at you if you dwell on it too much.”

“I couldn’t…” Skye stops and swallows, and May tightens her grip around her, waiting. When Skye looks up at her, her eyes are glistening. “I couldn’t live with myself if something bad happened to you because of me. I know you’ve said you wouldn’t hesitate to…do whatever it took to protect me or the people you love…but May, you can’t. I couldn’t live with myself if you did that because of me. Promise me, May, that you won’t do that.”

May hears the fear in Skye’s voice, but she doesn’t soften her answer.

“Sorry,” she says, holding Skye’s gaze and shaking her head. “That’s not how this works. Because I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I could have done something to save you and didn’t do it. And both of us signed up for this—even before we belonged to one another, we carried badges and promised to be the shield.”

Skye looks panicked, grabbing frantically at her face. “May…”

But May doesn’t look away, mirroring the gesture and cupping Skye’s face in her hands. “I won’t lose you, Skye. We’ve been over this before—I’ll protect you whatever it takes. But I can promise that I’ll do everything I can so that you won’t lose me either.”

When Skye kisses her again, it feels different. There’s still that lingering tremble, but it fades away as Skye rolls over on top of her again and pins May to the bed with arms and knees, nipping her lip once as she pulls away to stare down at her.

“I love you,” she whispers, eyes sharp and bright.

“I love you too,” May assures her, holding Skye’s gaze to make sure that she believes it.

Skye sinks down on top of her and kisses her until she can barely breathe. May buries her hands in Skye’s hair and holds on even as she moves lower, presses closer, takes her deeper.

It’s a long time before May catches her breath.

December 14, 2014

Skye:

She presents the San Juan mission the next morning to a plane full of sleepy-eyed agents, and they’re
airborne and headed south before dawn. Skye sits in the cockpit with May and watches the sun creep over the horizon, scorching the sky with color, but she forgets all about it when Trip sends a link to their phones, through the plane’s wifi. Skye clicks on it and watches the news story about the death of Senator Christian Ward and his parents and the torching of their house in the Northeast in an apparent murder-suicide, and bile rises in her throat.

“He did it,” she mutters, cutting off the sound and all but throwing her phone down onto her lap. “You know Ward did this.”

“There’s not a doubt in my mind,” May assures her, shaking her head, jaw tight.

“If we see him again,” Skye mutters, “is there any reason now why we need him alive?”

May glances over at her, looking both proud and pained. “Not anymore.”

Skye nods, gritting her teeth. “Good.”

Not long after that, Coulson gets a call from Sam and Billy Koenig, who have both been tailing Raina and are now in Vancouver. FakeMay is back on the map, telling Raina that Whitehall wants to see her. It’s as good a time as any for an extraction, and Coulson sends May, Skye, Trip, and Hunter with the Bus to do it while he leads everyone else in the quinjet on to San Juan. Skye hugs everyone as they leave—the cold dread is still settled firmly in her stomach, and she’s not willing to assume that everything will go smoothly from here on out.

She and May slip into her bunk to change into more functional clothes as they sail over the Great Plains, headed for the Pacific Northwest (technically Canada’s southwest…). Skye knows that they need to stay focused, but she can’t help wrapping an arm around May’s waist and kissing her neck once before they go back out into the main cabin.

“Maybe after this Obelisk nonsense is all over,” Skye says, sitting down on the arm of the sofa so that May can reach easier, “we could do another weekend out. Or even just a night. Whatever we can get.”

May’s hands are strong as she twists Skye’s hair into a tight French braid, but her voice is gentle. “That would be nice,” she agrees. “Once this is over.”

Once they reach Vancouver, Trip stays with the plane, Hunter goes to pick up Sam, May goes after the Hydra teams still sweeping the city for Raina, which leaves Skye to go pick Raina and Billy up herself. Raina doesn’t seem that surprised to see her at the safehouse door, and she follows willingly enough, but out in the hall, everything suddenly goes pear-shaped.

Without any warning, May is suddenly there. And shooting at them.

Instinct takes over as Skye shouts at Billy to get Raina to the stairs before engaging the other woman, screaming at herself in her head to stay focused.


You can beat her.

It’s easy enough to know this is someone else because May would never point a gun at her, would never hit her, would never look at her with so much contempt…Still, 33 is another one of SHIELD’s best, and she doesn’t go down easy. Skye doesn’t see the woman’s burned face much as they fight, but it is certainly strange to hear May’s voice and not see the fighting style that usually goes with it.
“Stand down, 33!” she shouts at one point, with the woman’s arm twisted up behind her back. “We can help you!”

The agent breaks away and Skye finds herself writhing on the ground only a moment later, wheezing from a hard kick to her ribs and dizzy from the hardest punch she’s every taken across her face.

“I don’t need your help,” she hears May’s voice saying over the click of a gun, and Skye wonders if this chilling phrase in her girlfriend’s voice is going to be the last thing she hears before she dies…

But it’s Hunter who’s suddenly bursting through the door and tackling 33 to the ground, disabling her and snatching the gun. Unwilling to shoot her and with no time to take her with them, they leave her on the floor of the safehouse and rush out after Raina and Billy. Skye feels sick to her stomach from the kick to her gut and has blood dripping from her nose and mouth, but she stays and guards Raina in the alley while Hunter goes to flag down May and their getaway car.

“SHIELD must be happy,” Raina sneers as Skye looks around anxiously, scanning for any Hydra agents besides the ones loitering across the street. “Your plan of dangling me like bait seemed to work.”

“We thought Whitehall wanted to kill you, not kidnap you,” Skye snaps, fighting to cover her flinch as her abs twist painfully when she scowls over her shoulder at the tiny woman.

“Something must have changed his mind,” Raina observes, staring at the agents across the street.

“Maybe he thinks you know something about the Obelisk. How it works,” Skye mutters, not really in the mood for conversation but willing to do anything to take her mind off the pain signals screaming from multiple places in her body.

Raina, however, seems startled by this fact. “Are you saying Whitehall has the Diviner?” she says, raising her eyebrows. “Well, that changes things. They don’t want to kill me; they need me.”

Skye turns to glare skeptically at her. “For what?”

Raina looks smug. “I can hold the Diviner.”

“You mean the thing that turns people to stone?” Skye clarifies, brow puckering. “You can touch it?”

Images of bare skin turning to stone flutter to the surface, but she presses down on them, trying to keep focused.

“It’s alien technology,” Raina explains, her tone subtly condescending. “The Diviner reads your DNA to determine if you’re worthy of its power. You’ll understand when you touch it.”

Skye rolls her eyes, turning away to scan the alley once again. “No thanks. I’d rather not die just yet.”

“You wouldn’t,” Raina assures her lightly. “Not according to your father.” Skye’s heart hops over a beat. “He believes you’re worthy too.”

She turns back to Raina with a glare. “Listen,” she sneers, edging slightly towards the other woman, “if you think you’re going to trick me into touching that thing, you’re as crazy as he is.”

But Raina only shrugs again. “It’s not crazy—it’s our destiny.”

She suddenly bolts, taking off towards the Hydra agents and waving her arms. “I’m over here!” she
shouts, but Skye overtakes her and seizes the woman by the arm, hauling her back away from the Hydra agents rushing towards them…

A van suddenly roars up the side street and mows down the two men, sending them flying several yards down the pavement. The van’s side door opens, revealing Hunter and Sam.

“Found May,” the Brit announces, reaching to grab Raina by her arm as Skye shoves her into the car.

“Nice try, Flowers,” Skye mutters, scowling at Raina as she leaps into the car with them and slams the door. “But we don’t share.”

Back on the Bus, May gets them airborne and bound for San Juan to catch up with the rest of the team while Skye sets Raina up in a clean bunk before going to her own to change clothes. By the time she’s re-dressed in a clean shirt (it’s probably May’s, she’s kind of lost track of what’s whose at this point) and black jeans, their plane is at cruising altitude over Utah.

“So you fought the other me?” May says as she enters the bunk too and sets a first-aid kit on the desk.

“Yep. She’s no fun,” Skye grumbles, pulling out an ice pack and shaking it before lying down so that she can set it on her aching abdomen.

“Did you have trouble fighting her?” May asks as she perches on the bed beside Skye and leans over her, cleaning the cuts on her face and applying butterfly bandages to the worst ones.

“I could destroy you if I wanted to,” Skye jokes weakly. “You wouldn’t know, since you never let me spar with you, though.”

May huffs out a laugh, and Skye opens her eyes.

“Raina says she can touch the Obelisk. That it can lead worthy people to the Temple.”

May looks amused and nods. “We’ll need to tell Coulson about this.”

“Yeah.”

May’s hand rests lightly on Skye’s chest, over her heart, and Skye covers it with one of her own.

“You did great,” May says, smiling softly, and Skye smiles back.

“Thanks.”

May leans over and kisses her carefully, an off-center kiss to the unswollen corner of her mouth.

“Take a rest. I’ll let you know if we need you.”

“Yes ma’am,” Skye answers with another tired smile.

She falls asleep to the sound of the engines carrying them steadily through the air.

When she wakes up a couple of hours later, the sky is a bleached bedsheet of late-afternoon winter, and Skye checks her phone once before sitting up—no news from Coulson and the rest of the team. Her abdomen is already purple where Agent 33 kicked her, and Skye doesn’t feel at all guilty for downing a few painkillers before letting her hair out of its badly-mussed braid and going out to the cabin in search of coffee.
Raina is sitting at the corner booth near the kitchenette, hands folded in front of herself and looking like she’s patched up her makeup. She glances up as Skye comes in, raising one eyebrow at her.

“Most prisons at least offer their guests a magazine,” she says with a cool smile. Skye shrugs in response.

“Most prisons don’t have beds this soft. Tea or coffee?” she asks, opening the cupboards and pulling down two cups. She can be civil if she wants to be…

“Tea,” Raina answers, sounding a little surprised. Skye quietly prepares them each a cup (she still prefers coffee but she’s managed to lower her tolerance a little, since May still doesn’t like the taste). As she brings the mugs over, Raina is holding up her Koenig-issue lanyard, staring at it contemplatively.

“My very own SHIELD ID,” she muses, glancing up at Skye as she sits down in the corner booth with her. “We match.”

Skye crinkles her nose and sips her tea without answering, and Raina rests her arms on the table, gazing at her.

“I’m sorry for trying to run,” she says, cocking her head as if trying to seem shy. “I just got swept up in the moment.”

“You’re lucky Coulson’s the forgiving type,” Skye mutters, rolling her eyes as Raina picks up her cup and takes a sip.

“Actually I feel very lucky we found each other,” the woman returns, a knowing look in her eye as she lowers her mug. “Your father’s told me so much about you.”

Skye thinks of Ward, the way she’d mocked him for believing anything Raina said.

*Keep your guard up. She’s the same person she’s always been—a manipulator.*

“That’s funny, since I’ve never met him.”

“Of course you did!” Raina says, setting her cup back on the table and turning towards her with an excited smile. “When you were born! Did you know he actually delivered you?”

Skye thinks of the man she saw in the photo back in Atlanta, the last time she’d seen Raina. He’d seemed excited enough by the baby in his arms.

There had also been a room full of carnage just a few feet away.

“That’s sweet,” Skye grumbles, fighting down against her gag reflex. “He also killed a whole bunch of people. He almost killed my friend Trip.”

Raina looks down at her hands, seeming a little embarrassed. “Does he get emotional? Violent even? Yes. But he’s also quite misunderstood.”

“Then help me understand him,” Skye says, setting her cup down and turning a serious gaze on the other woman. If this is the closest thing she has to a primary source, then she’s willing to at least hear the story. “Where did you two meet?”

“Thailand,” Raina answers, a faraway look in her eyes. “I was just a petty con artist, scamming tourists, running with a ‘bunch of freaks’ as we called ourselves. Your father took us in. Cleaned us
up. Showed us we were better than that. Before I met your father, I was a lost soul, clueless, with no idea where I belonged.”

“The daughter he never had,” Skye adds, guessing where this is going, but Raina surprises her.

“No,” Raina says quickly, shaking her head and turning her dark gaze on Skye again. “No one could replace you, Skye. You’re all he wants. Be honest, Skye—haven’t you ever felt like you were a part of something bigger?”

She thinks of stars and comets and how that’s never been a question for her.

“Tell me about the Diviner,” Skye orders.

And Raina does—a story about blue angels, aliens called the Kree, who came to bring change to humanity, who left the Diviner to guide the worthy to the temple so that they could inherit the Earth.

“How do you know where the temple is?” she asks, pulling over her tablet and opening a scan of the city map, placing it in front of Raina.

But the woman only glances down once before shaking her head. “That’s what the Diviner shows you. And only the worthy are allowed inside to witness its true power.”

A cold dread floods into Skye’s chest. Coulson. Simmons. Fitz. Mack. Bobbi…

“And what happens to the people who aren’t worthy?”

Raina glances down at the map again and shrugs. “I hope they’ve said their goodbyes.”

_Don’t believe her_, Skye tells herself as she climbs unsteadily to her feet. _Don’t…_

But this is not worth the risk of being wrong.

She races to the cockpit and doesn’t even knock before throwing the door open.

“May, we need to contact Coulson—we can’t let them go down there!”

May:

And of course, that’s when the other shoe drops.

“SHIELD-616,” a foreign voice announces over their PA system while a flashing red icon appears on their screens. “Do not engage your defenses, or you will be shot out of the sky.”

_Right on time, Hydra…_

“There’s Hydra quinjets on both sides,” Trip calls from the window of the cabin behind them.

“Then let’s step on it shall we?” Hunter suggests with audible panic, appearing from the rear of the plane.

“You have someone that I want,” Whitehall’s voice continues, “a woman named Raina, and I am going to send over a representative to get her. Any attempt to evade or retaliate will be met with hostile fire. Uncloak, and prepare to be boarded.”

She and Skye glance up and see their prisoner standing smugly just beyond the holocom, seemingly unsurprised by this turn of events. “Destiny calls.”
May feels the eyes of her entire team on her, but the decision is already made as she strides through the plane to pick up and loads her gun.

“I’m not giving up the lives of everyone on this plane for Raina,” she mutters to Skye and Trip, following close behind her. “She’s not worth it.”

“Hydra already has the Obelisk,” Skye protests behind her as she grabs her own gun and follows May towards the stairwell to the upper deck. She can hear a quinjet docking on the roof of her plane. “If they have Raina too—”

“We still have the edge,” May reminds her, setting her stance as she hears the airlock opening, joining the two planes. “Coulson’s already on site. Hydra’s not.”

“How the hell did they find us? We were cloaked!” Trip says, reaching the stairwell from the other side and pointing his gun upwards with them.

A cool voice answers from the top of the spiral stairs. “Raina’s tracker.”

May’s heart stumbles over its next beat.

She doesn’t glance at Skye, but it takes everything in her power to not immediately move directly in front of her and shield her from the gaze of Grant Ward as he tramps down the stairs, looking far too self-assured for a man with six guns pointed at him.

“… Lower your weapons,” he orders. “Anyone shoots, the plane goes down, and we all die.”

“Maybe it’s worth it,” May bites out, furious just at the sight of him.

“Let’s not get carried away just yet,” Hunter reminds her lightly from his position behind Ward, looking a little alarmed.

“You gave us Bakshi, and now you’re back with HYDRA?” Skye sneers beside her. “Pick a side, Ward.”

He has the nerve to smile.

“Oh I have, don’t worry.” He turns to Raina. “Let’s go.”

The woman doesn’t try to hide her smug smile. “With pleasure.” She moves towards the stairs, and Ward glances back at her—at Skye.

“You too.”

What?

“What?” Skye says.

Ward tosses her another cold smile. “I made you a promise Skye. I’m here to keep it. You’re coming with me.”

May can’t stop herself this time from shifting forward, hands tightening around her gun.

“The hell she is. She’s not going anywhere.”

*She belongs to us, not you.*
“Never to you.”

“May,” Skye starts in an uncertain voice, looking over at her.

“She comes, or the deals off,” Ward repeats calmly.

“Shut up,” May snaps, unable to keep the disgust out of her voice.

*I broke your larynx for a reason—you’ve said more than I should ever have let you say.*

Beside her, Skye lowers her gun. “May, if I don’t go with him, they’ll blow this plane to pieces.”

“They’re HYDRA. They’ll do it anyway!” Trip reminds her.

May’s eyes never leave Ward. “Skye, you *can’t* trust him.”

“Yes, you can, Skye. Look at me.”

The veins in May’s arms are standing out now, her voice dripping with contempt as she shifts marginally closer to Ward, further ahead of Skye. “*Don’t talk to her,*” she snaps, her words fine and filed.

Ward looks like he’s trying his best to look and sound sincere. “Skye I give you my word, you come with me, and we won’t fire a single shot. Everyone gets out alive.”

“Good one. Is that what you told my brother before you killed him?” Koenig sneers.

And as Billy distracts Ward, Skye lowers her gun and turns fully towards May.

“Skye…” May starts, finally looking over at her, afraid of what she’ll see, afraid of what she knows has to happen.

“…you can’t.”

*You can’t do this to me.*

*You can’t ask me to let you go.*

“There’s no other way,” Skye says softly, a pained look in her eyes. Her hand brushes the small of May’s back. “You know that.”

Their conversation from the night before pushes to the front of her mind, and May realizes that Skye must understand now.

*You signed up to be the SHIELD. Now she’s going to shield the five of you by doing what she has to do—leave.*

“Whatever happens I can handle myself,” Skye murmurs, holding her gaze and begging May to trust her.

*Make it a little easier on her.*

May nods slowly, and Skye finally steps forward, holding out her gun to Ward, who sets the safety and pockets it smoothly. May can’t summon the humor to smirk to herself.

She’s taught Skye five different ways to take it back.
“Oh, and Skye, don’t forget your tablet,” Raina then croons from the foot of the staircase. “You know, the one with the map of the city?”

May sees her give the woman daggers, but Skye just calmly turns and moves back toward May, picking up the tablet from the table. As she brushes past May on her way back to the stairs, though, Skye surprises all of them by suddenly turning into May and kissing her.

As their kisses go, it’s a relatively chaste one, but May realizes what Skye’s doing only a half-second before she pulls away. She lets her eyes show it, though—the fear and pain that always ride on the coattails of love, the exact reasons that she had warned Ward to never get attached—and when Skye faces Ward again, May is a tiny bit comforted by the surprise he just can’t seem to mask.

“You’re such an idiot, Ward,” Skye mutters, stomping past him and climbing the stairs. “Love you, May,” she calls down, and May loosens her throat enough to respond.

“Love you, too.”

The whole room seems frozen, but Raina following Skye up the stairs seems to snap everyone out of it. May forces herself to meet Ward’s eyes as he climbs the stairs, the glare glimmering between them like a laser field.

*She was never yours,* May repeats in her head, letting a shadow of a smirk ghost over her face.

*Watch your back.*

The airlock above them closes, and they’re gone.

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**Skye:**

Ward does not say a word once they’ve boarded the jet, pretending to be checking over the plane and crew as they detach and continue sailing south, presumably still towards San Juan. Skye tries to focus on how proud she feels for throwing him for a loop so that she doesn’t focus on how sick she feels, leaving May and the team behind.

*She’ll be all right. She understood. And you’ll make it up to her when you’re back together again…*

Her hands had been zip-tied as soon as she’d walked upstairs, her tablet taken as soon as she got on the plane, and since then, she and Raina have been sitting beside one another in cargo-hold jump seats, a soldier with an assault rifle sitting across from them looking very bored.

“Well, I’ll admit that was a twist I wasn’t expecting,” Raina says about an hour after their plane detaches from the Bus. “Seems I wasn’t the only one.”

“Whose side are you even on here?” Skye finally snaps, looking sharply over at her. “Your allegiance shifts are starting to give me whiplash.”

“I’m on the side of enlightenment,” Raina replies calmly, smiling at Skye’s scowl, “and whoever can help me get there fastest.”

Skye thinks of everything she’s seen from Raina in the past year and a half and figures that might be the most honest thing this woman has ever said.

“And as for him,” Raina says with an unsubtle glance at Ward leaning into the cockpit area, talking to the pilot, “I think it’s clear he’s on his own side now, like me. He’s not after enlightenment, which is unfortunate. But I don’t think you need me to tell you what he’s after—you’re already doing such
Ward does eventually sit down on Skye’s other side, a seat between them, which Skye is grateful for.

“So,” he eventually says, “that clears up a couple of things.”

“Like whether or not you’ve got a chance?” she mutters, staring straight ahead. It wasn’t really a question she wanted him to reply to, but he apparently heard it as one.

“Well, I could tell that May had moved on, but I had just assumed it was with Coulson,” he responds with ease that Skye can hear straight through. “You didn’t quite seem like her type.”

Skye rolls her eyes, thinking of how much else Ward has missed by assuming he had them pegged. As much as she would like to taunt him about this, though, replying is probably exactly what he wants, so she stares straight ahead and says nothing.

“Although, I guess when I think about it, it does make sense,” Ward then continues thoughtfully. “After all, you came onto our plane with more mommy/daddy issues than anyone I’ve ever met…”

“Her plane,” Skye interjects, unable to keep quiet any longer but choosing to ignore the comment about mommy issues. “Not yours. You were never a part of our team.”

“Don’t tell me you’ve forgotten everything we went through last year,” Ward digs, and she sees him looking over at her in her periphery.

Skye feels her heart rate climbing a little, and she forces it to even out. “You mean back when you were lying to all of us so that you could hand anything useful over to Hydra? When you worked for a man who ordered me shot?”

“I didn’t know—“

“Fuck you, Ward,” she snaps, turning suddenly to face him with all the rage in her eyes. “Nothing has changed. I was in love with her then, and I’m in love with her now. I wanted to see you dead a year ago, and that hasn’t changed either. I don’t care what you do—I am never going to forgive you for what you’ve done. And I don’t care where you take me—I will never give you what I know you want.”

She faces front again and lets out a slow breath, knowing full well what she’s just done—poked the bear and dared him to bite. He has seemed determined to be better and earn her forgiveness, or at least her trust, and she’s just promised him that he never will. She has no doubt that he would do exactly what he’s threatened in the past—it would be only the kind of man he’s always been.

She counts her breaths and says nothing else for the rest of the flight. Ward doesn’t either.

**December 15, 2014: May is 45, Skye is 25**

Once they’ve evaded Hydra’s follow-up missiles (no surprise there), contacted Coulson to tell him what has happened, learned about what happened to Mack in the underground city, and reunited with a very scared FitzSimmons, Bobbi, and Coulson on a green meadow in Puerto Rico, only about eight hours have passed since the sky-high showdown. May has no idea where Ward has taken Skye, but if Hydra wanted Raina, then she’s pretty sure that all three of them are somewhere on this island, looking for their own way into the city. The question is where.
“You made the right call,” Couslon tries to comfort her when they’re alone in the cabin again, reloading everyone’s guns with real bullets.

“The right call would have been to put two of these in Ward’s head,” May mutters, sliding the bullets in on top of each other.

“Then Hydra would have blown the plane out of the sky,” Coulson reminds her.

“Yeah,” she concedes, “but then they wouldn’t have Skye. Or Raina. Or the map. Or the location—"

“Six members of our team are still alive because of what you did,” Coulson interrupts her, catching her gaze with a stern look. “That needs to count for something. Skye can take care of herself. You’ve transformed her into an agent who’s smart and tough and capable. If there’s a chance for her to turn the tables, I’m sure she’ll take it.”

She holds his gaze, trying to assure herself of this, but she feels the need to tell him how the game has changed.

“She kissed me in front of Ward before she left,” she tells him, watching the surprise jump in his expression.

“I bet that threw him for a loop,” Coulson says, smirking as he goes back to loading the gun in his hand.

“I think it did,” May agrees slowly, “and that’s why I’m worried.”

Coulson pauses, glancing up at her worriedly, and May continues.

“Before, I could at least count on Ward not hurting Skye because he wanted her. Now, I have no idea what he’ll do.”

Coulson’s face hardens, and he snaps the clip up into the gun.

“We’ll find her;” he promises. “And him. And this time, I don’t need you to hold back.”

“Glad to hear it,” May mutters, snapping a clip up into her own gun.

Today, she’ll take one.

Skye:

Their jet lands on top of a mission-style multistory building in the middle of the city of San Juan. She doesn’t resist when a soldier hauls her to her feet and marches her out of the plane, but Ward takes over once they’re down the ramp. Raina disappears into a group of soldiers, and Skye focuses on actively getting a read on her surroundings.

*Five on the roof, four in the plane.*

*Two at the door.*

*Rifle, sidearm, field knife, garrote wire…*

“Counting men, weapons, I’m impressed,” Ward mutters as they tramp down another flight of stairs and into a half-empty hall. His hand has been slipping lower on her back as they’ve been walking. “How’s your marksmanship?”
“I don’t know,” Skye sneers. “Give me my gun back, and let’s find out.”

“Cool under pressure,” Ward comments as they approach a tall set of wooden doors. “She taught you well. Explains a few more things.”

“Maybe you don’t remember,” Skye scowls, turning to face him, “but we’ve played this little game of ‘let’s kidnap Skye’ before, and it didn’t end well for you.”

Her hands are tied in front of herself, the other soldiers aren’t paying attention. She could at least get one good head-crack in before anyone stopped her…

“That’s not my concern right now,” Ward says, pulling a knife out of his pocket and flipping it open. Skye meets his eyes unflinchingly.

“Then what is?” she demands.

He holds the knife calmly for a long, suspended second, and Skye stares back, trying to get ahead of him thinking through all the ways he could be about to hurt her…But then he simply slips it between her hands and slices open the zip ties.

She’s so surprised by this that she doesn’t move fast enough to grab for her gun, still in his pocket.

“Keeping my promise,” Ward says, stepping past her and out of reach.

He opens the door, and Skye’s heart vanishes in her chest, leaving disorienting emptiness in its place.

_No, no, no…_ 

She takes a deep breath before turning around, already knowing who she’s about to see.

The man has dark hair, almost black, a few inches long and flopping around his head in unkempt locks. He looks to be pushing fifty, maybe already there, though his skin isn’t too wrinkled compared to the baby photo she found last month. He’s wearing a brown suit with a black tie, and his face is slack with disbelief and wonder as he stands quickly while Ward nudges her into the room.

“I’m sure you two have a lot of catching up to do,” he says smugly as he shuts them in together.

The sound of the door closing echoes in the room, and Skye holds herself very, very still.

“Hi,” the man says, visibly forcing himself to relax. “I’m Cal. I’m your father.”

**May:**

Bobbi’s San Juan contact gives her an address, and it’s nearly right over the temple. FitzSimmons said they probably have a plasma drill to get through the hundreds of feet of rock between them and the city in no time, so the clock is suddenly running down fast. Coulson sends Trip with FitzSimmons to set charges to blow the city (and hopefully rescue Mack) while May takes the quinjet and puts it down on top of the theater. They can’t use comms with Hydra scanning for them, so the whole op has to be done old school.

“Two objectives—” Coulson says as he straps on a bulletproof vest. “Stop the drill, find Skye.”

He glances at May as he says the last few words, and she nods.

“Feel absolutely free to use lethal force,” he says, glancing around at the three of them. “I’d like to
end the day with as big a blow to Hydra as we can make.”

Bobbi and Hunter lead the way down the ramp, headed for the far stairwell.

“If Ward did take Skye to meet her father, like we think,” Coulson mutters, “then we might need to be worried about him, too.”

*Wherever she goes, death follows,* May remembers.

“Priority is getting everyone out safely,” she mutters. “But maybe we can just let Daddy Dearest worry about himself.”

**Skye:**

She’s tied to a chair in a kitchen, a few feet away from her father, unconscious on the floor. There is no way to think about everything in the past hour without the life-altering facts crushing her like books from a collapsing shelf, so she’s thinking instead about what she can do to get out of here.

*Chair’s wooden, pretty solid, could probably break it if you got it against the wall at the right angle —your odds are better of getting a knife off a guard—*

*Why does it have to be Fake May in here with us?*

*Why didn’t they tie Cal up?*

“The woman you look like—Agent May?” Ward says from the chair that he’s tied to nearer to the door, staring up at 33. “I knew her.”

He doesn’t look at Skye, but she’s sure she knows where this is going.

“How’d you end up with her face?” he asks, and the woman doesn’t flinch from the question.

“Serving Dr. Whitehall.”

Ward makes a face. “That’s gotta be an interesting story. Doesn’t it bother you?”

33 sounds almost robotic as she answers. “I didn’t have a purpose before. I was lost. Now, I’m happy to comply.”

“So you’re loyal to Hydra,” Ward mutters, glancing at Skye, who avoids his gaze.

“I’m loyal to Dr. Whitehall,” 33 corrects him.

“There was a guy I used to be loyal to,” Ward says, lifting his brow. “He went completely insane.”

“Not another word,” FakeMay says, raising her gun a few inches in Ward’s direction.

He only smirks, though. “Happy to comply.”

Cal suddenly stirs on the tile at her feet. His eyes fall on Skye as he slowly shifts onto his knees.

“Did he hurt you?” he demands first, but Skye shakes her head.

At the sound of footsteps, Cal scrambles to his feet.

“Oh good,” Whitehall says as he rounds the corner with two soldiers behind him. “You’re awake.”
“I’ve waited years for this,” he snarls, and Skye’s breath catches as he lunges at Whitehall. The doctor doesn’t even flinch, however, just squeezes a small device in his hands, and Cal freezes. He collapses to the floor, and Skye sees the paralyzer stuck behind Cal’s ear sending the continuous electric pulse through his body.

Whitehall steps coolly over her father and stands directly in front of Skye.

“Do you know what your mother’s gift was?” he asks pleasantly, peering down at her through his round glasses.

_This is the man who tore her apart_, Skye reminds herself, feeling hatred rise in her chest. _He is the reason you’ve never known your mother._

“No,” she answers through gritted teeth.

“She didn’t age,” he says, seeming pleased to be the one to tell her. “At least, not like the rest of us.” He crouches down, looking at her like a collector about to take home the prize of his life. “I wonder if that’s your gift as well,” he muses, tapping her knee, “or if you’re special in another way.”

Skye glares at his hand, her lip curling.

Whitehall glances over at her father, still immobile on the floor.

“Discovery requires experimentation. I killed your wife,” he reminds Cal pleasantly, “and before I kill you, I’d like for you to watch what I do to your daughter.”

Gunfire suddenly rings out in the halls, and all their heads turn towards the door. Relief floods through Skye’s system, dousing the flames in her chest.

_May._

_Coulson._

_I knew they couldn’t have shot down the plane..._

“Stay here,” Whitehall orders one of the soldiers, standing and moving with Agent 33 back out the door.

She and Ward can both see Cal grasping for the paralyzer on his neck while the gunfire and shouting continue outside, and Ward distracts the guard until Cal suddenly jumps him, jamming an elbow into his windpipe and snapping his neck over the edge of a counter. Skye flinches at the sound of the bones breaking.

_That’s not human..._

“You’re welcome,” Ward says, eyeing Cal suspiciously. “Now let’s get out of here.”

“Yeah, me too!” Skye shouts impatiently from where Cal’s left her still tied to a chair. “Come on!”

“It’s safer in here,” Cal says glancing back at her only briefly. “And I’m about to do something to Whitehall—I don’t want me to see you like that.”

He leaves them, and Ward rolls his eyes.

“Not exactly the nurturing kind, is he?” he grumbles, starting to shift his chair over towards the fallen Hydra agent.
It takes a few long minutes for him to get close enough, tip his chair over, and work a knife out of the dead man’s belt. Skye keeps her attention half on him, half on the sounds outside the door. She thinks she can hear Coulson at one point and almost shouts for him, but then she hears Cal’s voice, louder, and keeps quiet, waiting.

“Sorry your little family reunion didn’t go as planned,” Ward says once he’s free, scrambling over to her and cutting loose the restraints on her ankles. "The least I can do is get you out of here."

She scowls down at him.

Still trying to get in my good graces?

The last of her bindings fall away, and Ward hops to his feet, moving away. "Sit down while I check the door," he orders, but Skye just strides over and picks up the fallen soldier’s gun.

You don’t have to—

Oh yes you do.

He’s not even looking at her when she pulls the trigger four times.

Hand.

Koenig.

Fitz.

Me.

“Never turn your back on the enemy, Ward,” she spits as she steps over him out the door. “We’re all still killers when it counts.”

Bullet holes pock the walls and bodies are scattered around the halls, but all the noise seems to be coming from the lower floors. She rounds a corner and almost calls out when she sees May—oh God no, that must be 33—kneeling over Whitehall’s body—bullet? Not a broken neck? Must not have been Cal…

Skye picks up an extra clip of bullets of a dead soldier before rushing down the stairs.

She doesn’t encounter anyone on the way down, but when she reaches the ground floor, the unmistakable sound of her father shouting over Coulson leads her into the right room.

“Stop it!” she shouts, rushing in with her gun drawn to find her father standing over Coulson, pounding punch after punch across his face. "Stop it or I’ll shoot!” she shouts again in desperation as she nears them, but he doesn’t stop. Then, finally, desperately,

“Dad!”

Cal looks up at her, out of breath, blood spattered across his white shirt and eyes wild.

“He took something from me!” he stammers, panting hard.

“No!” Skye snarls unapologetically. “He saved you from killing more people. Now get up and get away from him!”

“You have to finish what we started,” he insists, and she thinks of what he said to her only an hour
ago: everything that’s about to happen is meant to happen.

“No,” she says firmly. “I’m not going down there, I’m not going to change or transform or whatever the hell you think is going to happen.”

“Why can’t you see that it’s a good thing?”

“Maybe it’s all the dead bodies laying around, or the fact that Hydra wants it!” she snaps back. “I’m going to make sure the Obelisk never gets down into that city. This is your one chance to walk away or I will kill you.”

Cal takes two steady breaths, gazing at her sadly, then climbs to his feet.

“Okay,” he says, taking one step back. “I’ll go. But I’ll be waiting for you,” he adds, low warning in his tone. “After you change, no one else will understand. Change is terrifying. But I’m your father, and I love you. I will always love you, Daisy.”

She can barely process anything as he turns and finally, finally walks away. Lowering her gun, she rushes to Coulson’s side and leans over him breathlessly.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” she gasps out, checking his injuries even as the knot of resolve in her chest loosens and her words become incoherent. “I couldn’t kill him and I wanted to…”

“It’s okay,” Coulson is saying under her, grabbing weakly at her hand. He’s in bad shape. “It’s okay…”

“Where’s May?” Skye demands suddenly, a chilling thought hitting her. “Is she here?”

What if she finds Cal or Cal finds her?

“She’s looking for you…” Coulson says, trying to sit up, but Skye pushes him back down.

“Then she’ll get you out,” she says, jumping to her feet and grabbing her gun as she rushes towards the door. “I’m going to stop Raina. I’m going to find the Obelisk, I’m going to make this right…”

“No Skye, don’t go down there!”

May:

She finds him on the floor of a ballroom, bleeding and battered but, for some reason, alone.

He’s already trying to explain as she rushes to his side.

“It was her father…he was here, but I think he might have really left…Skye stopped him from killing me…”

He stands steadily enough once his feet are under him, but she keeps his arm hauled over her shoulder as they make their way towards the door.

“Did he take her?” May demands, panic flooding through her.

Where would they have gone?

“No…” Coulson says, his voice gathering strength. “She’s looking for the Obelisk, she’s trying to make this right.”
May turns and meets his eyes. They don’t need to discuss this.

“We’ve got to get down there, too.”

They find the drill already finished digging and moved out of the way, a winch dangling a cable down into the hole that probably has a small cart at the bottom. Beside the pit, an opened case with a cutout the shape of the Obelisk sits, empty.

Coulson pulls away from her and hits the controls for the winch-cart, tucking his gun into its holster, and May realizes what he means to do.

“No, you can barely stand!” she says, stepping between him and the pit.

“I put her on this path,” he says, regret lacing his words. “I have to try to make it right. If we don’t get out before the bombs go off, get everyone on the Bus, get them out.”

But she shoves him back and hits the button to stop the cart.

“No—she’s my responsibility,” she says, holstering her gun. “I’ll do it.”

“May—” he says, taking a step towards her, but she snatches two glow-bars off a bench and pulls her hand back threateningly as she steps up to the pit.

“Phil, you need to stay alive,” she reminds him. “Without you, there is no SHIELD. I’ll find her.”

She doesn’t bother summoning the cart up—just hooks an arm around the cable and plunges down into the darkness.

Skye:

Mack won’t move. His eyes look wrong. She can’t do anything for him right now, not when she doesn’t know where Raina is or what she’s doing.

“I’m going to come back, okay?” she promises and races on into the darkness. She doesn’t recognize anything around her, and yet somehow she knows where to go.

Maybe it’s the countless hours she’s spent staring at the map for the past few months.

Maybe it’s something else.

Ahead of her, an impossible light glows, and she rounds a final stone wall to see Raina standing beside a stone pedestal in a shaft of light, the Obelisk clutched in her hand.

She smiles as Skye rushes in, gun ready. “I knew you’d come.”

May:

The glowing bars in her hand don’t illuminate much around her, and she’s not sure if she’s already lost track of where she is and walked a circle or not, but she’s afraid to stray too far into the maze without an Ariadne line to pull her up…

Coulson would have told the other team that Skye is down here. He would have told them to stop the explosion...

“Skye!” she shouts into the darkness, and her voice echoes back at her.
She hurries forward, looking for anything other than bare rock and dust, rounds a corner and finds herself face to face with Mack.

“Oh God,” she whispers at the sight of him, his blacked-out eyes, his battered body. “Where’s Skye?” she demands, wondering why he’s not attacking her like he did everyone else. Mack doesn’t answer, but when she tries to rush past him, he stops her with a vice grip on her arm.

“Mack! Let me go!” she shouts, striking him hard across the face with one of the rods, but his grip doesn’t budge.

“Let me go! Skye!”

Someone suddenly flies out of the darkness, clocking Mack across the back of the head with a flaming torch and drawing his attention.

"I got you, May!" Trip shouts, yanking her free and swinging the torch at Mack. "Let's find Skye and get out of here!"

Skye:

“We’re taking the Obelisk and we’re leaving,” she says steadily, her gun trained on Raina. “There are too many lives at stake!”

“You’ve got it wrong,” Raina says, holding up the Obelisk. “Whitehall, everyone’s got this all wrong. This doesn’t destroy. It gives life. New life! We finally get to find out what we become.”

The Obelisk suddenly glows in her hand, the familiar symbols appearing, and she holds it up, slowly uncurling her fingers until it is hovering in the air before her, unsupported by anything.

“Make it stop!” Skye shouts at her.

Raina only smiles broadly. “I can’t. Neither of us can now.”

The metal object hovers, the symbols appearing and shimmering in the shaft of light like ripples on water. It floats steadily over the pedestal and settles soundly there. Distantly, the world begins to rumble.

“If you want to leave, Raina says from the other side of the dais, “now’s your chance.”

Around them, the circular walls shift, closing in the room.

“I have to admit,” Raina says, circling the object, “I’m just the tiniest bit nervous.”

“Skye!” Skye suddenly hears someone shouting from the other side of the wall, and she reacts too late.

“No! May! No!”

The walls close, sealing the three of them in together.

“Jesus Christ, Skye!” May snaps, taking in Raina, the Obelisk, the room around them in half a second before turning a blistering glare on Skye. “What the hell were you thinking?”

Skye wants to hug May in relief and also hurl her away in fear, but she can’t take her eyes off the Obelisk. On the pedestal, the metal object suddenly begins to open, silver panels sliding back like a puzzle box and opening to reveal a cluster of deep-blue crystals that shift and grow upwards towards
“What is that?” May demands, pointing her gun at Raina. “What’s happening?”

“The future,” Raina breathes, smiling broadly.

“How do we stop it?” May mutters, her gun turning on the Obelisk, though she seems as transfixed as them.

Raina’s smile grows. Skye isn’t breathing.

“I don’t think we can.”

She grabs May’s hand.

The sound of a gunshot rings out, and Skye feels a pulse strike her body as though from an explosion. May’s gun clatters to the floor. The crystals are still there, she and Raina are still standing, confused and breathless and suddenly alone.

May is gone, her clothes puddled on the floor.

*Oh God, no…*

For an impossibly long second, there is only shocked, breathless silence. Her heart is pounding, and it feels like there’s a ball of heat glowing in her chest. Raina’s eyes flick to her once, and Skye sees her confused expression as her eyes fall on the place May had just been standing.

But suddenly, Raina’s arm is stiffening, turning black as carbon, and Skye sees the same stony crust growing on her own body.

*Just like Hartley’s hand…*

*Just like May in your dream…*

“Oh God,” she breathes, dropping her gun. She’s burning from the inside out, and the crust is growing, up over her chest, her mouth, her eyes…

And for a moment, there is only darkness.

She comes out of the blackness a few moments or a lifetime later to the world shaking violently beneath her feet. Rock is crumbling from the ceiling above them, some if it landing on May’s clothes, still empty on the ground. She feels the same burning in her chest as before, but now it’s everywhere, as if she’s gripping a live wire as it sends heat and power vibrating through her body…

Raina is slowly emerging from the gray shell across from her, the temple is collapsing, and all of a sudden, May is there, naked and confused and turning with wide eyes towards Skye—

“What!” she screams and rushes forward as the earth above them groans and begins to crumble.

Skye grabs May and throws them down against the nearest wall as the temple ceiling collapses, and once again there is only darkness.
Yep, this is the chapter where we start a little canon divergence. For the record, I DO have the rest of this fic mapped out, and the major events of 2b are all still going to happen, just with Trip around (because, seriously, f--k the writers for taking him away from us) and some of these new twists. And the change in the dream scene was absolutely intentional.

I know this was a dense chapter but I do appreciate any and all feedback, and I would love to hear your speculations on what's to come! Thanks again for sticking with this fic!
Sooooo...yeah I basically didn't intend to go on a month-long hiatus, but real life hit in full force around New Year's and, well...

I was originally planning to cram 2.11,12, and 13 all into one chapter, but in the end, I got to the end of 2.11 and realized it needed to be its own chapter, since the twist at the end of the last chapter means quite a few things would go differently in this one.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

December 15, 2014: May is 45, Skye is 25

Right now, all she can hear is their breathing, but for a moment, that’s enough.

It means that they’re both alive.

She knows she disappeared whenever the pulse had come out of the crystals...the sheep-hook function of her time-travel curse had kicked in, pulling her away from her present for a brief, agonizing minute, where she had found herself standing in the cabin of the Bus, docked in the Playground, some other time and place. She had waited through the disorienting minute with her heart racing in her chest, and panic flooded through her when she saw the stony shell growing around her body, just like the girl back in the diner all those months ago, just like Hartley...

Her body felt like it was being stabbed with a thousand tiny needles, the same pins-and-needles feeling that sometimes accompanied her time travel but now amplified, a thousand times more agonizing, and she had pushed frantically against the crust, trying to stop it from growing up over her chest to her neck, wishing desperately to bounce back to the cavern she’d disappeared from, desperate to get back to Skye and get her out of there...

And all of a sudden, she’d come back here, and the world was falling apart.

She had barely processed the ground quaking beneath her (no longer stony) feet and the rock falling from the ceiling above her when she heard Skye scream her name just before colliding with her, shoving her out from beneath the falling missiles and pulling her down against a wall. The temple was collapsing, the curved walls caving towards them, and May had held onto Skye, hoping that time would not pull her away again and leave Skye to face this alone...

A wall was tipping towards them and May had closed her eyes, waiting for the crushing impact...but it never came. The slabs of rock have sealed them in darkness, but they’re caught safely between them, amazingly untouched.

Now, May hears Skye panting and feels her warm body pressed against her as she puts up her hand, feeling the space around them. The earth has stopped shaking, everything else is quiet, and she has no idea how much earth has fallen on top of them. Still, they’re alive, and that is, for the moment, all that matters.

“Skye, are you all right?” she demands as soon as she can speak again, sliding her hands quickly
over Skye’s body, feeling for blood or broken bones.

“I’m okay,” Skye whispers back in the darkness, her hands imitating the gesture and patting quickly over May’s skin. “Are you?”

“I think so,” May answers. If she does actually have any injuries, at least she doesn’t feel the pain yet. “What happened when I disappeared?”

Skye takes a breath as if to answer, but the words never come.

“Skye?” May repeats.

Finally, Skye answers in a small whisper. “I don’t know.”

“Well, I know I can’t see you,” May says, skimming a hand again over the parts of Skye’s body that she can reach, “but I don’t think you’ve changed. No tail or gills, as far as I can tell.”

She waits for Skye to respond, but her words are met with only silence again.

“Skye?”

“How are we going to get out of here, May?”

May sighs and reaches up, feeling the height and breadth of the pocket of space they’re trapped in. “The whole team knows we’re down here,” she says, attempting to sound reassuring. “Trip was with Mack when I left them in the tunnels, so they might still be close. I don’t know how much rock is on top of us, but all we should do is make noise, not try to move it. We’re lucky we got trapped in this space and not crushed, and I don’t want to move the wrong rock and change that.”

It’s not long before they both hear Trip shouting on the other side of the stone barrier, and they both shout back, calling out reassurance that they’re all right and drawing him to the right place.

“Oh, I’ve got you. Hold on!” he calls to them, and May heard him beginning to dig.

It feels like hours before they are unearthed, since by the time Fitz, Simmons, and Coulson join the effort, the engineer has reminded everyone about the possibility of a cave-in if things are not moved in the correct order, and a thorough assessment is done before the digging resumes, this time with a plan. By the time a window is made in the rock (enough for Trip to pass in a flashlight and a haz-mat suit for May to shimmy into), reinforcements have already been radioed for from the Gulf bases, and she and Skye are met by an entire search-and-rescue team as they finally squeeze out from between the slabs of rock. By then, she and Skye had been able to call out a basic rundown of the temple’s events to Simmons, so as soon as they are both freed of the rubble, they are immediately sealed into haz-mat suits. Simmons is visibly distressed about what Skye had said about the crystals in the Obelisk and the blast they had apparently created, so any protests are ignored and they are both rushed up to ground level (oh, is it already sundown?) and back to the plane, where they are promptly sealed inside a hastily-constructed quarantine tent in the cargo level.

“It would probably be simpler to put you both in the Cage,” Simmons says apologetically from the other side of a translucent tarp as she seals it to the floor with duct tape, “but we’ve already got Mack in there, and until we are certain that he’s fully himself again, it would probably be best if we kept him separate…”

“It’s fine, Simmons,” May says, stripping off her helmet but leaving the suit on once they’re sealed in the tent. Skye follows her lead, looking nervous.
“We’ll have Trip pilot the Bus back to base once more reinforcements arrive,” Simmons says, removing her own mask on the other side of the barrier. “I’ll radio ahead to the Playground and have them start setting up a better quarantine for you all.”

“Fine,” May said, nodding. “Has anyone found Raina—or her body—yet?”

Simmons shakes her head. “There’s an awful lot of rock to clear, though…”

May nods, glancing at Skye, who is slowly lowering herself to ground tucking herself into a corner of the flimsy square. “Keep us posted,” she orders, and Simmons nods once before hurrying back to the SUV.

May finally turns to get a good look at Skye in the fading daylight and sees that she was right—no gills, no tail, no visible change that she can find. But Skye is still sitting with her knees pulled against her chest, arms around her calves, and she seems to be breathing slowly and intentionally.

“Skye?” May says, crouching down and reaching towards her, but Skye immediately pulls back further, seeming to shrink into herself.

“Don’t,” she whispers, her eyes finally meeting May’s. “I…I’m just…I need a minute.”

May lowers her hand, understanding. She’s been exactly here before.

“Okay. I’m here if you need me,” she says, sitting down in the opposite corner on the cold metal floor. Skye says nothing in response though, just ducks her head down into her folded arms and continues to breathe very, very slowly.

The Bus gets airborne only a couple of hours later, shuttling some of their team back to Base after enough extra hands have arrived to help with the cleanup effort in San Juan. True to Simmons’ word, a glassed-off section of the medical wing had already been set up to Simmons’s standards, and May and Skye had donned their haz-mat suits once more for the walk through the base into their home until they’re cleared by medical. Mack is placed in a separate quarantine down the hall, Trip has been benched at the Playground since he came back in with ripped stitches (from working to help move the rubble in the search), and Coulson is still in Puerto Rico with Bobbi and Hunter making sure that the theater gets completely cleared of bodies and any left-behind Hydra hardware.

She and Skye have been brought fresh clothes and allowed sponge baths since arriving, but Simmons has set up an itinerary of tests to be run on them once they’ve been fed.

“Obviously there’s no way of knowing whether what you’ve described of the blast from the Obelisk was truly a threat or not,” Simmons says as May and Skye face her from the other side of their separate glass partitions, “but based on what we’ve seen from it and from the underground city up to this point…I’m sure you can understand that it’s better safe then sorry, yeah?” She had looked at them beseechingly, sounding sincerely apologetic. “And I’m so sorry to split you up, but—“

“I get it, Jemma,” Skye interrupts, nearly the first time she has spoken since they’ve landed. She’s redressed in a soft gray sweater, arms wrapped protectively around herself. Her eyes are on the ground even as May and Simmons watch her as she continues. “If one of us is fine and the other’s not, you don’t want us to infect each other.”

Simmons looks relieved. “Yes, exactly that,” she says, attempting a smile that doesn’t do much to cover the worry written all over her face. “Again, I’m sure there’s nothing to worry about, but we’ll run a lot of panels to be sure…”

“Do what you need to do,” May cuts her off, still watching Skye carefully, the way she’s scuffing
the toe of her shoe nervously against the floor.

But Simmons actually approaches May first, leaning close to the barrier.

“Is there anything I should know ahead of time?” she asks in a low whisper, gesturing to the vial of blood she drew out of May’s arm earlier, now sitting on the counter beside the glass, awaiting testing.

But May only shakes her head. “I’ve had two surgeries since the time-traveling started, but no one’s mentioned anything off in my blood, so I don’t think so.”

Simmons nods, stepping away and addressing them both again.

“Please tell me if you need anything,” she says as she picks up the vials of their blood. “I’ll do anything I can to make this process as painless as possible.”

“Thanks, Jemma,” Skye calls weakly, and the scientist attempts to smile again as she dims the lights in their area.

“Get some rest,” she says quietly, and then she’s gone.

Once they’re alone, they both retreat to their beds as if by some unspoken command, and May immediately sets to work pushing her bed up against the glass separating her and Skye’s spaces.

“I suppose it could have been worse,” she attempts as Skye nudges her own bed on the other side until the two cots are pressed against the same section of glass. “We could have been put down in Ward’s old cell.”

Skye doesn’t respond to the comment though, just climbs slowly into her bed, her eyes still distant. May waits until they’re curled in their beds and facing one another through the barrier, though, before addressing the elephant in the room.

“Something happened in that cave,” she says, not a question.

Skye’s eyes fly up to hers, and May finally sees the fear unmask.

“You can tell me,” May whispers, reaching out to press her fingertips against the glass, the best she can do if she can’t actually touch Skye.

The girl opens her mouth, closes it, then reaches haltingly for the barrier before pulling her hand back, looking afraid. And even though she doesn’t want to, May thinks of a different brown-eyed girl in another lifetime, one who had grinned maniacally as she all too readily offered May her hand. Now, she forces herself to not pull her hand away.

Skye bites her lip as she finally lifts her eyes to May’s again, then slowly reaches out until her hand is barely resting on the barrier on the other side of May’s, their fingertips aligned like combination dials.

“Can you…” Skye starts, then pauses to take a shaky breath. “Can you feel…that?”

May feels her brow furrow. She can’t feel anything through this barrier.

“Feel what?” she asks, confused, but Skye just pulls her hand away, looking down again.

“Where did you go?” she asks in a whisper, pulling her blanket tighter around herself. “When you disappeared in the cave?”
May pulls her hand away from the glass too and settles further into her mattress. “The Bus. It was docked in the Playground, empty. I was barely there a minute. But this…stuff…started growing on my legs, and I was trying to shove it away and just wanted to get back to you…”

She looks up to see Skye staring at her, wide-eyed. “So you turned to stone too?” she asks breathlessly.

“Too?” May repeats, trying to keep her tone in check. Skye hears it anyway though, ducking her head guiltily.

“I didn’t know how Simmons would react…” she attempts, but May hops over her defense, going straight to questions.

“What happened to you?” she demands. “How did you get out of it? I think I disappeared out of mine when I traveled back, but you…”

“I don’t know,” Skye whispers. “The stone grew all over me too, and I couldn’t stop it, couldn’t get away…then everything was dark, and it felt like there was something burning in my chest, and then suddenly the rock started falling off, and the world started shaking around us and I was looking for you…”

“And Raina?” May asks urgently.

“The same,” Skye says, “but I didn’t really see her as she was coming out of her…shell. The temple was collapsing, and I was just worried about you, and then you were there…”

May reaches out and touches the barrier again, and this time Skye is a little quicker to press her hand against it.

“We’re all right, Skye,” May says reassuringly. “It’s over.”

But Skye looks away once more. “So you don’t feel any different?” she asks quietly.

“No, but you do,” May says knowingly.

Skye keeps her eyes down. “Maybe I’m just imagining it,” she says at last. “It’s been a long day.”

“And you haven’t even told me yet what happened between Ward taking you off the plane and me finding you in that temple…” May adds leadingly, and Skye looks up at her. “I heard you met your father.”

Skye nods silently but doesn’t offer the story, and May understands if she still needs more time to process everything—it only happened this morning.

“I’ll tell you,” Skye promises slowly, “just…not yet.”

May nods, then kisses her fingertips and presses them against the barrier again.

“Take all the time you need.”

She wakes once in the middle of the night thinking that she felt something rattle the glass against her bed, but Skye is still sleeping soundly beside her, so May lies back down, deciding she imagined it, and falls right back to sleep.
December 16-17, 2014:

Mack is cleared from quarantine that morning, but she and Skye are still trapped in their individual hamster cages while the base around them buzzes with activity throughout the day. Work is moving steadily along back in Puerto Rico, and Coulson, Bobbi, and Hunter are on their way back to base by noon that day. The big story they call in ahead of them, however, is that while setting up the explosives to blow a shaft and flood the underground city, Raina was spotted by some scientists, two of whom are now in critical conditions after having their throats slashed.

“Slashed with what?” Skye demands when Coulson delivers this news. “She wasn’t armed when I found her in the city.”

“Well, she might have improvised with some of the tools that had been brought down to the tunnels, but to hear the least-injured witness tell it,” Coulson says, shaking his head, “she was covered in… thorns?”

May looks pointedly over at Skye, but the girl only drops her eyes to the floor. “Crazy. Wonder what that’s about…”

She manages to coax Skye into working through some tai chi that afternoon, anything to help with the restlessness that they’re both already feeling, sealed away from the action. They’re twenty minutes into their routine, thought, when Simmons hurries in, a blue biological sample case in one hand.

“Bobbi, Hunter, and Coulson just got back with everything from the city!” she announces, looking relieved. “And the science team that finished the work in the underground city sent back some of Raina’s blood!” Her exclamation comes with a little too much excitement as she lifts the case for them to see.

Skye drops the tai chi pose immediately, moving closer to the glass, her brow furrowed.

“How did they get it?” she asks, sounding both concerned and impressed.

“One of the agents got a few shots off at her when she was attacking the team, trying to get to the lift to ride it up out of the tunnel. They gathered the sample off the railing of the cart.”

She sets tests running on Raina’s sample, then checks the progress of the tests analyzing her and Skye’s blood.

“Anything interesting?” May asks, watching the way Simmons’ brow furrows as she looks at the printouts.

“Ah, something…” the scientist says, double-checking the papers. “I’m going to run some more tests…”

She doesn’t finish her thought, moving over to computer and opening some programs.

“Simmons,” May says in a warning tone, glancing at the anxiety that is flickering in and out of Skye’s expression. “Talk to us, please.”

But Simmons doesn’t turn back around, and May knows that isn’t a good sign. “I’ll tell you what I know when I know it for sure,” she says, and that’s the end of it. It’s not like May can threaten her much when she’s trapped inside this box.

Bobbi shows up that evening before the lights go down with a brightly-colored gift bag in each hand,
which she deposits into their cells through the airlock drops.

“Quarantine survival kits,” she says with a sympathetic smile, pulling a stool up near the glass as they open up the bags. “Did my best to cover all the bases, but if you want to do any trading, just pass them back through and I’ll help.”

“You’re so sweet, Bobbi,” Skye says with an overwhelmed smile as she spills the contents of her bag out onto her bed, and May smiles at the sight of the candy, magazines, playing cards, and canned drinks that roll across the blanket. “Thank you so much!”

“Quarantine’s no fun,” the blonde says with a shrug, but May can tell she’s still proud of herself. “I’ve been there before, too.”

“Learned your lesson about chasing bad guys through chemical processing plants,” May comments, inspecting her own bag of snacks, drinks, and paperback books while remembering the mission that had landed Bobbi in quarantine a couple of years back.

“Come on May, you would have done the same thing,” Bobbi mutters, shrugging self-assuredly. “Actually, you two rockstars are both here because you did.”

There’s an abrupt silence after that, and the three of them look awkwardly at one another. May knows she’s right—she hadn’t thought twice about rushing into a place that she knew had possessed Mack and was rigged with imminent explosions…because she needed to make sure that Skye was safe.

But Skye had run in there chasing Raina.

To…stop her?

She glances through the glass at the girl, who is staring down at her treats and avoiding both of her eyes. When Skye does look up at them though, it’s with a package of Warheads in one hand and a deck of cards in the other.

“You know, Bobbi,” she says with attempted excitement that’s not fooling anyone, “if you stick around, you could help us play a game of poker and pass the cards through the boxes for us. Winner of each hand chooses which loser eats which flavor of Warhead. Game?”

It’s a weak attempt at distraction, but May and Bobbi give each other a single look that shows they’re agreeing to let it slide.

The three of them play six rounds of five-card draw, and Skye loses every time.

The next morning, Simmons reports that all their toxicology panels have come back negative, but after the reports about Raina, she is ordering more blood samples, saying something about covering all their bases “just to be safe”. May glances over at Skye through the glass as a white-suited lab tech draws another vial of her blood, but the girl just holds out her arm for the needle and sinks behind her magazine again as soon as it’s done.

Whitehall is dead, and Coulson wants to strike another blow while Hydra is on the defensive. Their team carries out the mission conference circled near their quarantine chamber, which she imagines is mostly so they feel included in decision-making—it’s not like Simmons is about to let them out to participate in the mission. The plan comes together to fake giving up Bakshi to Hydra in order to tail him back to the other heads, one that’s going to call on everyone’s acting abilities to pull off well. The temperature of the room seems to rise a little when Mack mutters under his breath about Coulson’s system of decision making, and May steps a little closer to the glass.
“Don’t mind him,” Hunter says quickly, “he’s just coming down from the worst alien acid trip of all time.”

“That’s not funny,” Fitz says quietly from behind him, and May remembers then the incident at around this time last year when two of the boys on her team had been taken under foreign control… “Mack didn’t ask for this to happen.”

“No one asked for any of this to happen,” May reminds them, crossing her arms. “Hydra forced our hand and now it’s time to force theirs.”

“Did Hydra force our hand?” Mack demands suddenly, finally facing her and Coulson directly. “Or did we leak them detailed plans and the location of that city?”

“Hydra took them when they took Skye!” Coulson snaps. “Are you saying we shouldn’t have gone in to save her?”

But Mack’s anger is unspooling now, his voice growing angrier. “I’m saying there wouldn’t have been anything to take if you and Skye hadn’t been obsessed with the alien messages in your damn heads!”

“All right let’s take a breath,” Bobbi says putting up a hand, right as May mutters “Watch yourself, Mack,” and crowds closer to the glass.

“That’s not what he’s saying,” Fitz says in Mack’s defense as Coulson shouts over him, “I shouldn’t have to ask you to save one of our own!”

“You never ask!” Mack shouts back. “You just give your orders no matter how cracked-out they are! And everyone knows you’ve got more secrets!”

“Guys,” Skye’s quiet voice almost gets lost in the cacophony, but May looks over at her as Mack continues shouting, now in her direction.

“Everyone knows she’s got something to hide, too! Should we ask Bakshi what he knows about Agent May? What he’s so eager to use against us?”

The monitor on Skye’s wall shows her pulse climbing to dangerous heights. An empty soda can is rattling on a table in her pod, everything is around her is shaking…

“We were trying to stop Hydra!” Coulson reminds him.

“We didn’t stop anything! We unleashed something on the planet!” Mack yells back.

Trip takes a small step that puts him between Mack and Coulson. “Hey, we don’t know if that’s the case, man, and everyone made it out alive, so take a breath…”

“This is not the time for this, Mack,” Bobbi adds, her voice louder and a warning flash in her eyes.

Beside May, Skye’s face is slowly dissolving into unchecked panic…

“Please…” she whispers, staring at the rattling can on the table.

“That’s enough!” May shouts, slamming her fist against the barrier.

She guesses that it gets everyone’s attention mostly because she has never raised her voice at the collected team before. But their eyes are on her, not on Skye, and that’s the important thing right now.
“We have work to do,” she reminds the group in her sternest voice, staring down each member of the team in turn. “Hydra is still out there, still a threat to the world at large, and we are some of the only people who have the ability to hit them hard enough to knock them down right now. What’s done is done. Now go be SHIELD, and go do the next thing.”

Everyone is quiet as they file out to prepare for the mission. Skye’s hand holds the empty can in a white-knuckle grip, but the floor isn’t shaking anymore.

May decides that conversation can wait until later.

The plan is slated for late afternoon, and that night, Bobbi, Trip, and Hunter are still off tailing Bakshi, hopefully to Hydra’s last heads. Coulson’s been sending them updates through their tablets, so neither of them are sleeping, waiting to hear how the mission ends. They’ve barely spoken all afternoon, but the silence is starting to wear on May as they sit propped next to one another on their beds, so close and still so far apart.

“What’s the first thing you’re going to going to do when you get out of here?” she eventually asks quietly, glancing over at Skye, who lowers her tablet and drags a hand through her four-days-dirty hair.

“A shower,” the girl answers. “You?”

“Hugging you and then following you to the shower,” May responds with a smile, and she’s glad to see that it earns a tentative one from Skye in return.

“This wouldn’t be half as unbearable if they’d just put us in a room together,” she says, rolling on her side and facing May, who turns towards her as well.

“As if we would have done anything with everyone watching us like bugs under a glass,” she reminds her, and Skye’s smile grows a little.

“I don’t know…we would have had to pass the time somehow…”

May smiles gently at her, then reaches over to brush her hand once over the barrier between them. Skye touches back, but her eyes change a little, that fearful panic slipping back into them. And May decides then that if Skye’s not going to tell her, she can still make sure she understands.

“When I first got back from Bahrain,” May says, watching how those words immediately capture Skye’s full attention, “it took me weeks to settle down. I was time-travelling all the time. I’d disappear without warning multiple times each day, and every night when I tried to sleep, I had nightmares and would wake up somewhere different.”

Skye looks overwhelmed by this revelation, staring attentively at May as she asks, “What did you do?”

May glances down as she remembers. “I was afraid to go to sleep, since that was so much worse than being awake, but it didn’t take long for my husband to notice that I wasn’t sleeping. He got me a prescription, but the meds didn’t stop anything—they just made me foggy when I woke up somewhere else, and I realized that that was worse. I needed to be alert to protect myself or to hide.”

Skye is avoiding her eyes again, so May presses forward.

“The thing was, I’d had years to imagine what this time of my life was going to be like, and I was still completely unprepared for what it was. My older selves hadn’t told me details up to that point—I think I was trying to spare myself any worry before everything finally happened. Eventually though,
I got a visit from a future self, one who comforted me and told me everything was going to be okay. She was the first one who told me to take up tai chi and learn how to focus my mind and energy, she taught me a few more tricks for managing appearances in unexpected places…”

“You’re lucky you had her,” Skye says then, and May smiles gently.

“I was. And that’s my point, Skye.”

The girl finally raises her eyes again, and May reaches out to touch the barrier.

“I know what it’s like to feel completely out of your depth, unable to control something that’s inside yourself. It’s awful, and it’s terrifying. But pretending it wasn’t happening would have just been a disaster. I needed to learn how to live with it. And I couldn’t do that until I faced it.”

Skye purses her lips, and May sees her eyes welling with tears.

“But I don’t…” Skye’s voice breaks, and she ducks her head, swallowing once before looking up again.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with me,” Skye manages in a trembling whisper. “I don’t understand…I have no idea how this is happening…”

“It’s okay,” May assures her, flattening her hand against the glass, leaning as close as she can. “We’ll figure this out. But I need you to trust me enough to tell me, so that I can help you.”

Skye presses her palm against the glass on the other side of May’s.

“I love you,” she whispers, a desperate sound.

May presses her hand harder and doesn’t pull away.

December 18, 2014:

They’re doing tai chi together the next morning when Fitz walks into the lab. With one look at his expression, both of them stop moving immediately.

“Fitz,” Skye says, straightening up and moving as close as she can to him. “What’s wrong?”

He moves at a slow shuffle to stand directly in front of her. May shifts close to the glass too, but tries not to crowd them. When she gets close enough though, she can see that the engineer has Skye’s digital wristband clutched in one hand.

“Can you tell me?” he asks Skye, staring at her with an earnestness that breaks May’s heart. “I fixed your bio-meter watch. Checked your vitals at the time of the temple collapse. Your heart rate was recorded at almost 300 bpm.”

May feels her own eyes widen in spite of herself.

“That’s…fast…” Skye says slowly.

“No,” Fitz says, shaking his head. “That’s inhuman.”

May feels a brief pulse go through the floor, and the glass between her and Skye rattles once. She
takes a slow step closer to the glass between her and Skye and presses a reassuring hand against it, but the girl doesn’t seem to notice.

“I thought the readings were a mistake, that I had it wrong…I’ve been struggling to…” Fitz can’t seem to find the word and slams a frustrated hand down on the counter, which makes Skye jump a little. “Something’s wrong with the data in my head!”

“What are you saying, Fitz?” May presses, glancing at Skye, who looks more anxious by the second.

“I was thinking how the heart monitor seemed to shatter from the inside out, but was still on Skye’s wrist when we found you, so that doesn’t make sense either…and how we found you both, basically unharmed in the collapse with destruction all around you…”

The tremor in the floor starts again, and May shoots Skye an alarmed look.

“I thought I was losing my mind all over again…” Fitz continues, sounding increasingly desperate.

“Fitz…” May warns. “Skye…”

But neither of them acknowledge her…

“But…I think you survived because you caused it…and I can’t figure out how May survived either, but I’m pretty sure that the data we’re running on your DNA is going to explain both of those things…”

Skye is backing away from the glass, which is rattling loudly now, her hands gripping her head…

“Skye!” May shouts, fighting for her attention.

“Meimei!” her voice shouts from across the room.

Her head swings around just as the glass between her and Skye shatters. Reflexively, she ducks, covering her head and neck, and when all is quiet and she straightens up, there are five people standing around her.

In the doorway over Fitz’s shoulder, she sees Simmons, looking confused and held in a vice grip by another fully-clothed Melinda May. Fitz, looking incredibly shaken, is staring through the glass at the scene before him. And Skye is tucked into the furthest corner from all of them, wrapped in the bare arms of another Melinda, one who seems to have pulled her out of the way of the flying glass and down against the opposite wall at the last second.

For a long, awful minute, no one speaks or moves. Finally, the Melinda in the doorway pulls Simmons all the way into the lab and shuts the door, locking it behind them.

“Okay, all of you,” the woman says, looking around at May, Skye, the other Melinda, and the two scientists. “Let’s talk.”

Skye:

Skye has no idea at what point the two extra May’s appeared in the room, but for now, all she can focus on is the strong arms wrapping around her, holding her tight away from the spray of shattered glass.
“You’re okay, Skye,” May’s voice is murmuring near her ear. “Deep breaths, get your heart rate down…it’s going to be okay.”

Afraid to do to a person what she just did to the glass wall, Skye shrinks back, trying to push the woman a safe distance away. “Get back, I don’t want to hurt you…”

But May doesn’t even loosen her grip. “You won’t. It’s going to be okay.”

In the next pod, her present-day May is looking around at the rest of them, seeming as confused as her.

“Jie?” she says, stepping over the jagged pieces still sticking out of the base of the glass panel. She’s wearing shoes, thank god…"

What’s…"

“Go ahead and let them out, Simmons,” the outside May (who is wearing clothes that would have come from the floor of their bedroom, meaning that’s probably where she appeared…) orders Simmons, nudging her towards the control panel of the doors. “You know by now that they aren’t a biological risk, so let’s put this observation to bed, all right?” she says, waiting over Simmons’s shoulder as the door hisses open.

Skye’s heart rate is lower now, and nothing seems to be shaking anymore. The May nearest her is still holding on tightly, though, and Skye suddenly realizes that she is also partially using her as a shield, since she’s still completely naked.

“We’ll clean up the glass in a minute,” the May from out in the lab is saying as she treads into the room over the broken glass and offers the naked visitor the blanket off Skye’s bed to cover herself and a pair of shoes that Skye is sure they left sitting by their bedroom door before they left the base for San Juan a few days ago. The woman surrenders her grip on Skye to wrap herself in the blanket and stuff her feet in the shoes while the third May—Present-day May—hovers around them, still seeming equally confused.

“When are you here from?” May demands when she can finally string a whole sentence together. “Both of you, when—“

“Today,” the two May’s answer in unison.

“I’ll explain in a minute,” the clothed one adds, helping Skye to her feet.

Skye nervously allows them to lead her out of the wreckage to sit down at a lab bench beside a white-faced Fitz. The present-day May sticks by her side, tucking in close beside her and slipping a protective arm around Skye’s waist. Skye flinches from her touch but doesn’t pull away, and May holds her reassuringly while the other May’s move around them.

“Simmons,” one of the women says, steering the scientist to the computer. “Go ahead and pull up all of our bloodwork data, and let’s put this all together.”

The blanket-bundled May steps up beside Fitz, whose gaze is still leaping rapidly between all of them.

“Are you…” he attempts, his eyes finding Skye’s. “Are you seeing three May’s too?”

Skye bites her lip and nods sympathetically, but then the version of May who seems to be running this show steps closer to them again.

“First of all,” the clothed one says, facing the May beside her, “I’m from tonight, she’s from ten
minutes from now--” she points at the woman wrapped in the blanket, “--and you’re about to leave, aren’t you?”

The other May nods once, glancing at Skye. “It’s going to be okay,” she says reassuringly once again, and then the blanket falls bodiless to the floor, and there are only two May’s left in the room.

“Would somebody please…” Fitz begins, glancing at Skye and Simmons. “You both saw that, didn’t you?”

Skye nods, but Simmons only purses her lips.

“It’s time travel Fitz,” she says tightly. “Obviously.”

“Obviously?” he repeats. “I’ve been hallucinating off and on for nearly a year now. You lot don’t get to throw around the word ‘obviously’ with me anymore. And secondly, what in the hell…”

“I’ll explain that in a minute, Fitz,” Skye and the woman beside her both attempt, but it’s Simmons whose voice is sharpest.

“What was happening before I walked in, Fitz?” she says, glancing up from the computer and over at him. “Why is the glass panel broken?”

“It was, ah…” he glances at Skye, and the older May steps between them.

“Sit down, Fitz,” she orders in a gentle voice that still leaves no room for argument, and he slowly lowers himself onto another stool. “Simmons? Ready?”

The biochemist nods, turning the computer monitor to face them.

“Fine. You first then,” the other Melinda orders, stepping back until she’s standing over the other May’s shoulder, leaning against the lab bench.

Simmons takes a deep breath and glances around at all of them before training her eyes on the monitor as she begins.

“We finished analyzing your blood and Raina’s last night,” she says, pulling up a program that shows a three-dimensional visualization of a section of DNA. “Rain’s DNA now contains extra macromolecules, which, I don’t think I need to tell you, is impossible—the DNA of every human on the planet is made of the same four substances, and now hers can no longer be included in that category. Besides that, DNA is not supposed to change with sickness or infection. Cell processes can be disrupted, individual cells can be mutated and then multiply while transmitting their mutated DNA, but finding a complete DNA mutation in an entire organism is…unheard of. It’s hard to know what effects this change is having on her, since she’s not here to examine, but we’ve already heard that she seems to have experienced a physical change—the thorns, if reports are to be believed…”

Skye feels May glance over at her, but she can’t make herself look away from Simmons.

“Your DNA results, May, show no changes,” Simmons says, cuing the screen to split and reveal three different images. She points to the outlier image, labeled with May’s initials. “To be honest, I was expecting to find something, given your already-strange habits and your exposure to the same gas as Skye and Raina. There’s no difference, however, between yesterday’s samples and the ones from your physical back in the spring. But Skye…your DNA shows the same change as Raina’s. It’s not what it was before. So the inevitable question is…if it’s not thorns all over your body, what does this change mean for you, Skye?”
There is a long pause following those words, and May tightens her arm protectively around her. Simmons finally glances around at all of them, looking very nervous, before zeroing in on Fitz.

“What were you talking about before I came in?”

Fitz glances at May and Skye again, but it’s the older May who answers.

“He’s trying to figure out why Skye’s heart rate was at 300 bpm before her watch shattered from the inside out,” she says, and both May and Skye’s heads snap up, expressions equally startled. The other woman looks unworried, though. “I’m guessing that between everything Simmons and Fitz have said and the shattered panel…we all have our answer.”

The five of them look at one another, this truth settling heavily on them, but Fitz is clearly still trying to catch up with the rest of them.

“I’m sorry, clearly I’ve missed something,” he finally mutters, crossing his arms and scuffing his feet, “but what is the story about the time travel?”

He’s looking at the present-day version of May, but the other May answers for her again.

“It’s been going on since Bahrain,” she says, pulling his gaze over. “Sometimes I drop out of the present and reappear in another time and place—usually somewhere significant in my past or future. Sometimes I travel to people I know now, so I’m technically meeting them before my present self meets them, which was the case with Skye. It’s never been something I could control…until I ran down into that temple.”

What?

Skye’s head swivels over, and the May beside her seems equally startled.

“What?”

The older woman turns to face them, focusing on May.

“When you were in the temple and you disappeared, you were desperate to get back there and not leave Skye alone, weren’t you? And almost as soon as you had that thought, you were back there. Isn’t that right?”

Slowly, the May beside her nods.

“So, right now, if you were to think of the moment right before the glass over there broke, think of standing on Skye’s side of the glass and pulling her out of the way of the glass explosion just in time…”

Beside her, May suddenly vanishes, her clothes collapsing, unsupported, to the seat of the stool before sliding limply to the floor.

A long beat of silence stretches after that, and Simmons is the one to speak for all of them.

“So…your DNA isn’t different, your ability is more or less the same, but now, you can consciously control it?”

The only May left in the room nods. “It seems that way. I don’t know if it will last, so later tonight, she—” she points at the pile of clothes on the ground, “—is going to travel back to this particular hour, reappear in her room where she can get dressed, then go get you and bring you here for this conversation.”
“You keep saying ‘she’,” Fitz mutters, looking up at May. “But you’re her…”

May nods understandingly.

“I am. I’m her, just her plus a couple of extra memories and experiences. In a couple of hours, she’ll be me and makes this visit.”

“And she—“ Fitz points at the clothes on the ground “…she’ll come back here still?”

“I always go back to my present, one way or another,” May answers. “The third May was here for about three minutes, so that’s how long the present May will be missing from her present time.”

Fitz looks like he’s doing his best to keep up, but Skye can still see traces of the same skepticism and confusion that May must have seen on many faces by now as she explained this story.

A moment later, May suddenly reappears between them, snatching up the blanket and pulling it around herself while Fitz makes an uncomfortable sound and turns away and Simmons averts her eyes, blushing slightly.

“Worked, didn’t it?” the older May asks, looking at the present May.

“Yeah…” May agrees, gathering up her clothes and stepping around one side of a lab bench to hastily redress. “And it’s going to stay like that?”

The other woman shrugs. “I’m only from tonight, that’s all I know so far.”

Another silence stretches as they wait for May to rejoin them, and when she does, the older May looks around at them all.

“The question remains, what are you all going to do, now that you know about both of us?”

Simmons sighs and looks over at the shattered wall panel, biting her lip.

“If Skye’s shaking things without any control, then I’d want to help remedy that—or help her learn how to control it so that she and others aren’t in danger.”

“Same, I think,” Fitz says. “But…it’s DNA, Simmons. We both know we can’t change that. She’s just different now, and there’s nothing wrong with that. All it takes is time to learn to live with it.”

Skye feels tears welling in her eyes as she looks up at Fitz and remembers all the ways they had had to learn with changes—his changes—almost a year ago, when the world fell apart…the first time.

She had thought that surviving betrayal, the fall of SHIELD, and nearly losing Fitz would the hardest month that they would ever go through as a team.

Sometimes, when it rains it pours…

“We’re all swimming in an unknown here,” the visiting May says, pulling their attention back to her. Her expression is somber. “But even as we try to work this out, we need to keep doing what we’ve always done—we need to protect each other, and we need to protect the world. Don’t lose sight of that, no matter what happens next.”

She meets each of their eyes in turn, and they all nod back at her, one by one.

“For now…” Skye says, thinking of the high tempers she saw yesterday when the team had gathered outside of her cage. “I think it might be better that this just stays between us.”
“Coulson knows about me,” May reminds her. “But we can wait to tell him about Skye until we have more information to tell.”

“All right,” Simmons agrees, though she still sounds a little uneasy. “But what if there’s another incident like that?” She nods towards the mess of shattered glass.

“Then we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” the present-day May says. “I’ll take responsibility for Skye. But we should let her be the one to control when and where the truth comes out to the team.”

Fitz nods. “It’s fair,” he says quietly. “I’ll do what I can to help.”

“Me too,” Simmons says, meeting Skye’s eyes.

Relief floods through her, and Skye stands up to pull them both into a hug.

“Thank you,” she whispers over their shoulders, unable to put into words how much their promises mean to her, especially when phrases like ‘difficult’ and ‘hard to handle’ have consistently led to goodbyes in her life.

There’s a soft, familiar sound behind her, and she turns around to see her May looking down at a pile of clothes on the ground.

“She’s gone back,” she says, looking up at the rest of them, and Skye nods and holds a hand out to her. She knows this is asking a lot from May, but she also knows that May won’t refuse her now.

May closes the distance between them and joins the embrace, closing the circle of warm bodies around Skye. Skye holds on to the three of them and commits this feeling to memory, of the four of them united against the unknown, their chests and arms hemming her in with so much love and courage that for just a moment, it feels like everything stops shaking, or rather, all starts shaking in the right direction once again.

And for the smallest moment, there in the middle of their tiny, chaotic universe, the world rights itself.

Chapter End Notes

Isn't it nice how different things can go when characters just, you know, talk to each other?

Obviously, not losing Trip means a lot less angst out of the rest of the team throughout the Aftershocks episode, but the 2b plots are still running and we've got to get there somehow. Still, it was completely unnecessary to have paranoid!Jemma and secret-keeper!Fitz throughout all this, especially when they have extra secrets of May's to keep anyway.

May's development and Skye's changes will get more fleshed out in the next chapter, and we get to move towards some huge things for the next couple of chapters to finish out 2b. I can't believe we're finally here!

As always, thanks for keeping up with this story! Any and all feedback is appreciated.
December 20-21, 2014: Skye is 25, May is 45

“Skye.”

“Mmm.”

“Skye, wake up.”

She’s not ready for this, so she groans and sinks further into her pillow. “May, nooo…”

“Skye, come on. It’s six thirty.” A gentle hand slides down her back and rubs softly but intentionally between her shoulder blades. “You’re already getting a late start. Don’t push your luck.” May kisses her bare shoulder once, then Skye feels her slipping out of bed. “Thirty seconds and I’m taking the blankets.”

“Okay, okay, okay,” Skye grumbles, her eyes still closed, starting a silent countdown in her head and savoring her last moments in the warm safety of their bed.

This feels like old times.

The day following their release from quarantine had been awkward at best, but it had been nice to get a shower, a change of clothes, and some much-needed time alone behind walls that weren’t transparent. May had been in and out for a little while, talking to Coulson about things that she told Skye about later (Raina was kidnapped right in front of a team of SHIELD agents by a teleporter
“who didn’t have eyes…?”), but when they were finally alone together in their room that night, their first private conversation had nearly been a non-event.

“So,” May had said, pulling out her tennis shoes from beneath the bed and setting them by the door. “Seven am tomorrow.”

Surprised, Skye looked up from the laptop on her thighs, where she’d been scanning police reports for any rumors of a woman with thorns all over her body or a psychopath breaking necks in Puerto Rico.

“What happens at seven am?” she asked slowly, watching as May gathered their dirty clothes into a laundry bag.

May had barely glanced at her as she moved around the room, organizing the mess they’d left as they packed up for Puerto Rico (nearly a week ago already…).

“Training. We’ve had a week without routine—can’t let that go much longer.”

“May…”

“Oh, and…” May had dropped the bag by the door and moved towards Skye, pulling something from her back pocket. It was another biometer, one that looked just like the one she had before, but when May took her hand and slipped it onto Skye’s wrist, she immediately felt that it was heavier.

“Fitz made you another biometer,” May explained, looking at the watch and not at Skye as she perched on the edge of the bed beside her. “This one’s in a titanium shell, so it should hold up under more pressure than the last one did. We’ll keep a closer eye on your vitals—it seems like stress was triggering you before, so we’ll work on maintaining your resting heart rate.”

May pressed a button and the heart rate monitor was displayed, showing her pulse jumping along at a higher rate than usual.

“May…” Skye repeated desperately, pulling her arm out of May’s grip.

“What do you want me to do, Skye?” May said quietly then, finally meeting her eyes. “Do you want me to act like things have changed? Because they haven’t. We’re both still agents who need to be ready to do our jobs. And if we skip training, that’s not helping anyone, least of all ourselves.”

Skye had stared at her for a long moment, unable to believe what she was hearing.

“But everything has changed May,” she finally said, closing her laptop and setting aside, curling her legs up beneath her body. “Everything is different, and we don’t know anything about it.”

“And there’s only one way to figure it out,” May had responded calmly, holding Skye’s gaze. “I know I’m totally out of my depth here, Skye. You don’t need to tell me that. But hiding in this room isn’t what we’re here to do, and you know it’s only a matter of time before you’re back on the field. So unless you want to wait until you’re cornered to find out what you’re capable of, you and I need to start somewhere, and we need to start now.”

Skye had continued to stare at her, relief and terror competing for control of her next words.

“But May…what if something unexpected happens? What if I break something else? Something bigger? How will we explain something like that away?”

“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it,” May had replied, still calm, reaching out and laying
one of her hands over Skye’s.

Instinctively, Skye had flinched back, an involuntary action that she managed to arrest almost immediately, but the look in May’s eyes told her that she still noticed. May hadn’t reached for her hand again, but she didn’t move further away.

“I’ve been here too, Skye,” she reminded her quietly, lowering her eyes to the space between them. “I remember how it feels to have changed and not know how to control any bit of it. But there’s only one way forward here. Or at least, only one way that doesn’t mean you sitting in a self-imposed cage for the rest of your career.”

Skye had thought of the years May spent in Administration and looked down guiltily.

Carefully, she reached out and took May’s hand in hers, and they looked up at the same time, their eyes meeting cautiously.

“Do you still want to be an agent?” May asked her, squeezing her hand. “Because if the answer isn’t yes, then what we do next can be different.”

Skye pursed her lips, trying to answer honestly.

“I don’t want to be anywhere else. But I don’t know if I’ll just end up being more of a liability than an asset.”

“There’s only one way to have any say in that.”

“What if I hurt you?” she asked in a trembling voice, and hurt immediately bled into May’s expression. “Not just in training. What if I’m sleeping and I accidentally hurt you...here?”

May pursed her lips, looking sadly at Skye, then leaned slowly towards her. Their lips met in a cautious kiss, their first one since the one that Ward saw. Both relieved and terrified, Skye kept herself from leaning into it, but May slipped a hand up Skye’s neck and into her hair, guiding her gently closer. Not taking, just giving, meeting Skye exactly where she was.

Fearless.

When May had finally pulled away and looked at her, her gaze was serious.

“I know this is not the solution,” May whispered, her mouth hovering just over Skye’s, “but it is the foundation. I love you, Skye, and I’m not going anywhere.”

And so they began this cautious journey, a trek through a minefield that it feels like they have no map for. As far as Skye can tell, no one who doesn’t already know about her change suspects anything to be different. Trip had seemed surprised but not necessarily suspicious when May told him Skye would be sparring with her from now on; May and FitzSimmons had insisted that they didn’t tell Coulson anything; and although Skye still feels like everyone else in the base is looking at her differently, Skye keeps telling herself that this is because of the stories about Puerto Rico that have already gone around the base, not because she has the mark of the beast on her forehead. Each day that they get up and pretend like everything is normal, though, something niggles in the back of her mind, telling her that this will be impossible to maintain. Still, Skye doesn’t have any better ideas, so she’s willing to keep her side of this ruse up as long as it lasts.

Her training with May is barely different from before, except now they’re both constantly checking her heart monitor every time it seems like she’s getting amped. They’ve only had one slip-up so far, one when Skye was working on kicks and sent the bag swinging without touching it. May had
calmed her down and led her through their breathing and focus exercises for ten straight minutes after that.

“Pick a point and focus only on that. Let everything just become background noise around you.”

Now, five days since the Temple, the buzzing that Skye feels from head to toe is finally starting to feel like background noise. Today, nothing swings without her touching it, the ground never quakes, and any nervous trembling in her hands has all but faded away. Skye’s the most nervous as they spar, where her instincts have freer rein than usual, but May doesn’t go easy on her, and Skye is battling back with punches, blocks, and kicks almost as fast as she can deliver them. Her heart rate stays high, but even though she’s sure May has noticed, she doesn’t back off. Eventually, Skye realizes that if she wants this match to end, she’s going to have to win it.

*She’s pushing you. She always knows where the line of your confidence is. And every day she’s pushed you until you take a full step beyond it.*

She has a feeling that May lets her take her down—it’s a move that she just taught Skye this morning (“Your body weight can pull down men much bigger than you if you know where to put it—but this takedown won’t be too effective against someone much heavier than you.”). As Skye rolls out of the tumble though and comes up with a fist raised for a finishing blow, it’s the sight of May lifting her hands in defense that makes Skye freeze.

There’s a long moment as they stare at one another. May doesn’t seem afraid, but she doesn’t use Skye’s hesitation to lunge for her either.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Skye finally says firmly, lowering her fist but not yet moving off May.

“I know you don’t,” May says soberly, lowering her gloved hands so that they land on Skye’s knees. “And that’s why I don’t think you will.”

When they both climb to their feet and start another round, May actually throws her to the floor. The room still doesn’t shake. And Skye guesses she can call that progress.

May decides that they’re done for the morning after that, and the two of them don’t speak much as they head back to their room to fetch clean clothes and shower. May heads up to Coulson’s office after that, and Skye quickly swipes a small breakfast from the kitchen before escaping back to their room. Curling up on their bed with her bagel, Skye opens her laptop and checks the last ten hours of CCTV feeds from all ports of exit from Puerto Rico, scanning for signs of Cal, or Raina, or this eyeless teleporter leaving the island. Nothing turns up, so Skye pulls up her other project—analyzing the footage from Raina’s disappearance from the middle of the highway.

There’s only grainy footage of the metahuman’s appearance (and his and Raina’s disappearance) from a traffic cam several hundred meters up the road, and Skye re-watches it again and again, squinting at the shitty resolution that none of her programs seem to improve. The man (she’s assuming it’s a man and not an alien) seems to have come out of some kind of bright, crackling light, a confining dome that enclosed Raina before he appeared, protecting her from the armed SHIELD agents surrounding her.

*But where did he come from?* Skye asks herself for the thousandth time. *And where did they go?*

She’s already compared it to the limited footage that exists of the arrivals of Thor and other visitors from realms beyond, but this is clearly not the same thing. While the portal that delivers Asgardians seems to open from the sky downwards, this man seems to appear with a much smaller invasion of space. And besides that, Asgard has been conspicuously absent from everything in recent months—
it’s not like Thor dropped in to help on the day SHIELD fell. A girl covered in thorns hardly seems more important than an event like that.

*Imagine if May disappeared and reappeared with this kind of display…* Skye smirks to herself. *Someone surely would have noticed her traveling by now…*

But it’s only then that Skye realizes that, with the exception of the first night out of quarantine when May had to hop back into the past and run interference with their merry moment that morning, Skye hasn’t seen or heard her disappear at all. Every morning, she’s woken up with May still in her pajamas beneath the blankets, seeming to have gotten a full night’s rest.

*We still haven’t really talked about that…*

Skye looks down at her hands and thinks of the way they held an Obelisk just last week. Of the man she met just before that. Of the things he told her.

*There’s a lot of things you and May still haven’t talked about.*

When May comes back into their room a little while later, Skye hesitates only a moment before jumping straight to the question.

“*You didn’t time travel last night, did you?”* she asks. “*Or the night before?”*

May pauses in riffling through the files she brought downstairs with her, looking away thoughtfully. “*No, I guess I didn’t,”* she says, sounding surprised to say it.

“*So not at all since the day I broke a glass wall?”* Skye presses, watching May shake her head, stacking the files on the desk. *Index candidates…*

“*No, not since I went back that night to the same morning and ran interference between Fitzsimmons and the two of us.”*

Skye closes her laptop and sets it aside, pulling in her legs and crossing them beneath her. “*I realize my change is the more angst-inducing, but have you thought about trying out your ability?”*

“What’s there to see?” May asks, crossing the room and lying down next to Skye on the bed. Though she would normally take the opportunity to cuddle up against her, Skye stays put, not letting herself be distracted.

“*May, you can choose to travel through time and space. Wouldn’t that be such a cool skill to get used to and learn how to use?”*

May closes her eyes and sighs. “*Skye, all I’ve wanted for years is to just stay in my present time. If I can choose that, I’ll choose it every time. Not time-traveling in the middle of the night has been the best thing to happen to me since you came along.”*

Touched as she is by the compliment, Skye keeps pushing.

“*But if you can control it, what if you could choose to go back to something happy? Or at least, something interesting?”*

May cracks an eye, looking up at her. “*Nostalgia’s fine, Skye, but I’d rather deal with reality.”*

“What if I dare you, then?” Skye says with a smirk, rocking over until she hovers on her hands and knees above May. “*What if we start small and worked our way backwards? Why don’t you try just*
traveling to this base, but like, last week, when we were all in Puerto Rico? See how accurate you can get with your location. What if you try to appear in the hangar or something?"

“I still turn up naked, Skye,” May reminds her, tugging on a dangling lock of Skye’s hair and quirking a brow, and Skye wrinkles her nose.

“Ugh, yeah you’re right,” she agrees, glancing around for inspiration. “Ok, what about in here? Like, just appear in our room, get dressed, and then you can go check out what was going on around here when we were away?”

May sighs and closes her eyes again, and Skye thinks she might be about to come back with another excuse. But instead, there’s suddenly the familiar sound of air rushing in to fill an empty space, and May’s clothes are wilting bodiless into the bed beneath her.

For a moment, Skye can only hold her breath, a little disbelieving, but then she laughs to herself and lies back down on the bed next to May’s vacated clothes, waiting. A few minutes go by, and Skye eventually goes back to her project on her laptop, but then she nearly pitches it in surprise when May reappears with a burst of air just a few inches away from her, bouncing onto the mattress with a surprised thump.

“Well?” Skye demands as May catches her breath, rolling on her stomach and grinning over at Skye.

“Yeah,” she says, sounding a little amazed. “It worked.”

May:

The game is fun for a little while. She doesn’t bother to re-dress between her disappearances as she yo-yo’s back and forth from the past to the present, testing the limits of her ability. Skye seems more excited than she is, grinning excitedly every time May reappears and demanding the details of where May just went and what she saw.

“This base back before we arrived last winter. Pretty sure that Billy was the only person here.”

“I just went into Fury’s office in the Triskellion a couple of years ago,” she tells Skye after attempting a travel several years into the past. “Told him what he needed to know to cover for me for the future.”

“How did he take it?”

“With skepticism and condescension, as he should. I think I made enough of an impression, though.”

“Why don’t you try traveling somewhere further away?” Skye suggests for the next trip. “Not far time-wise but like, geographically. Can you think of somewhere across the country where you could appear…safely?”

May thinks for a moment, then closes her eyes, focusing on the picture of the place in her mind, calling up today’s date...

This time she’s only gone a moment. As soon as she sees that she is exactly where she meant to go, sees that it’s still early in the morning, she sends herself back to Skye.

“My father’s home,” she tells her, smiling a little. “He’s out in Arizona.”
Skye bursts out laughing. “You didn’t spook him, did you?” she says around an excited grin. “How often are naked women turning up in his house?”

May hits Skye with a pillow. “I appeared in the guest room, thank you very much,” she snaps, grinning despite herself.

Skye dodges her next strike with the pillow but still doesn’t stop laughing. “What if you tried going somewhere further back in time? Like…awhile back?”

May thinks back to her string of childhood homes, trying to remember one she could safely travel to, but then she suddenly remembers an event she always wished she could choose to travel back to and watch.

She spends over an hour in the past on that trip, and Skye looks a little concerned when she finally reappears in their bedroom, so May smiles immediately to put her mind at ease.

“I went to my dorm room on my class’s Academy graduation day. Stole some clothes and went and watched the ceremony. Coulson still had all his hair.”

“Sure is a shame you can’t take objects with you,” Skye says with a smile, tossing May her t-shirt. “I wish you could bring back pictures.”

May does dress then, and the two of them go together to fetch something for lunch, the air in the space between them feeling a little lighter than it has in a long time. She gets called up to Coulson’s office again after that, but Skye brings the traveling up again when they’re back in their room that night.

“What about visiting me?” Skye asks out of nowhere, and May looks up from the stack of Index candidate folders she’s been poring over, trying to find any references to encounters with blue crystals or 0-8-4s. She sees Skye has the List unfolded on her lap, staring down at the mutilated paper.

“What do you mean?” May asks, but Skye continues to stare downwards.

“I mean, I know we talked about it before, how the visits might slow down in the future, so maybe this is it…maybe you just get to start picking when they happen.”

May thinks about this for a moment.

“Did I ever tell you in your past that I could control my travel?”

Skye thinks for a minute and then shakes her head.

“No. But maybe you just knew that I couldn’t know that ahead of time?”

May closes the file and gets up from the single desk (they never got around to hauling in a second one—Skye always works on their bed anyway…). Crossing to Skye’s bedside, she takes the proffered List and looks at the dates.

“What one should I try?” May asks, looking over the months and days.

“I don’t know. The one when I was still in Colorado was kind of fun,” Skye suggests, leaning on her shoulder as she scans the List.

“How old were you?”
“Six.”

May considers the possibility. “Do you remember the address? I don’t know if I can go somewhere that I’ve never seen before.”

Skye shakes her head against her shoulder. “No, I don’t remember it. And I don’t want you to get lost somewhere in the past either…”

“That’s not really an issue anymore,” May says with a shrug. “I could just pop right back here.”

Skye sits in silence long enough after that that May pulls away and looks over at her. The girl is biting her lip, avoiding May’s eyes.

“I was just thinking…” Skye finally says slowly, “didn’t you say there were two of you there that day?”

Skye runs her thumb self-consciously over the scar on her right wrist, and May immediately understands.

“What day was that?” she asks, looking back at the List. “What year?”

“May 31, 2004,” Skye answers without hesitation, pointing to the date on the paper. “I did it just after midnight.”

May thinks of the house she saw so briefly when she found Skye, of the clothes her other self had been wearing, and the information she had passed on to the younger visitor.

“Do you remember the names of the people you were living with? Do you remember how much you weighed? Do you remember the address so I can tell the ambulance?”

The house is dark when May appears in the living room, silent as a grave. She immediately finds the phone and dials 911, telling them what’s happening in the back bedroom, a room she can’t let herself (make herself) enter just yet. For the agonizing four minutes that she waits for the ambulance, she steals an outfit from the parents’ closet, writes the essential information on a piece of paper, and tucks it into a purse left abandoned on the kitchen counter.

When the ambulance finally comes speeding up, she rushes the EMTs to the back room, where it is both amazing and horrible to see herself, only half-dressed, holding tightly to the wrist of a fourteen-year-old girl, one she barely knew at that time over a year ago. She finds a pair of sweatpants for the other woman, passes her the purse and jacket, and confronts her younger self’s fear by calling it exactly what it is.

“Melinda,” she says, shoving the other woman hard against the wall when she tries to insist she shouldn’t go with Skye to the hospital, “Stop. being. a coward. Get out there, and don’t leave her until you have to.”

She remembers that this was her cue to go back, so she focuses on the image of her bedroom, of a whole, healthy, grown-up Skye waiting for her on the bed, and suddenly she’s back there, pulling Skye into an embrace that she finally, finally, doesn’t shy away from. Skye’s arms hold her tight, and when May pulls away, she kisses the scar on Skye’s wrist before kissing her lips. Skye doesn’t suggest another visit after that, and May is glad she understands.

It’s not until they’re getting ready for bed that night when Skye says anything else about time travel.

“What about going to the future?” she says without preamble, and May sighs as she pulls off her
blouse in exchange for one of their worn-out t-shirts.

“Why would I want to do that, Skye?” she says, gathering the day’s dirty clothes into a laundry bag.

“I don’t know,” Skye says, attempting to sound like she hasn’t been thinking about this for awhile. “Couldn’t it be fun?”

“Staying in my own time in place is fun,” May replies, but even as she says it, she already knows she’s going to give in and try this, and she sees from the gleam in Skye’s eye that she knows it too.

“Try just going to this room,” the girl suggests. “Maybe…I don’t know, a couple of months from now?”

So May pauses before climbing into bed, thinks of this room, of a date four months down the road…

Were it not for the lingering vertigo, May might have thought that she had simply conjured up a mess rather than traveling to the future. The room is the same, lit by only the same lamp on the nightstand that was burning when she disappeared, but she can immediately tell that something is different, off. Clothes and clutter cover the floor, and there’s a certain smell in the air that hints at neglect. The assortment of photos that Skye had run off on basic copy paper are no longer stuck to the wall above the desk, and as May looks around for a clock to be sure of the time, she notices that the dreamcatcher is no longer hanging on the headboard of their bed…

The bed where Skye is sprawled on top of the covers, curled around her open laptop, still fully dressed but breathing steadily in light sleep.

May contemplates waking Skye just to say hello, thinks better of it, then decides to just wake up Skye’s sleeping laptop screen and check the date in the corner to be certain that she arrived on the day she was aiming for.

She pads barefoot across the carpet on silent steps, reaching carefully around the open laptop screen and touching the spacebar to wake up the computer. The display wakes, showing Skye’s login screen, but it still shows the date in the corner—the date May had been attempting to travel to.

And suddenly, Skye’s hand grabs hers.

May jumps within her skin and looks up at Skye’s face, watching the swift slide from sleep to alertness, realizing as the girl sits up that her hair is much shorter, barely reaching her shoulders…

For a brief moment, there is only silence, May trying to decide if she should first comment on Skye’s haircut or first tell her where she’s visiting from.

But Skye’s hand is tightening around hers, a grip that is almost painful, and May gasps in protest even as Skye’s face crumples and she abruptly releases May, withdrawing on herself and hiding her expression behind her hands.

“How could you do this?” a broken voice bleeds out from behind the small barrier, a voice that hardly sounds like Skye’s. “How could you do that…and then leave?”

May can’t move, but her mind pulls the ripcord pull her. Almost immediately she’s back in the same room, standing in the same spot, looking at the same girl, but with everything around them as it was.

“Well?” Skye asks, watching her eagerly. “Did it work?”

May can’t speak, so she focuses on finding her abandoned sleep clothes, pulling them on, and
climbing into bed.

“May?” Skye repeats as May flips off the light and pulls the covers up to her shoulders. “Did you go where you were trying to go? Was it the future?”

Forcing her throat to loosen, May says the only thing she’s willing to say.

“Yeah. It worked.”

She can’t see Skye’s expression in the dark, but the silence echoes with confusion. She feels the girl lying down and waits for the contact of Skye reaching out for her, but she doesn’t.

“What did you see?”

May takes three slow breaths before she answers.

“You’ll see it eventually,” she promises.

It takes a long time for her to fall asleep.

They’re supposed to get up for training at 6 the next day, but a message to both their phones wakes them up well before that. Skye wakes slowly as May opens the message from a SHIELD contact in Portugal, sitting bolt-upright as she processes the words on the screen.

_A very strong woman with a sword was taken into custody in Faro this morning by local police. Look familiar?_

The booking images are attached.

“Get dressed,” May orders Skye immediately, scrambling out of bed.

The whole team is assembling on the Bus as May rushes up the stairs to the cockpit to start prepping the plane. As she opens the cockpit door, however, she nearly collides with another woman, another Melinda, who is in the middle of pulling on the set of extra clothes that she still keeps in the cockpit.

“Morning,” the other woman says shortly, taking in May’s appearance. “You on your way to Portugal?”

May nods, locking the cockpit door and squeezing around the other woman to climb into her seat. Once she’s dressed, Jiejie climbs into the other seat, seamlessly taking over the other side of the controls. The pre-flight checks go faster with four hands at work, and May soon announces over the PA system that they’ll take off in five minutes.

“Still December?” Jiejie asks then, leaning back in her seat and closes her eyes.

“Yeah,” May mutters, rubbing a tired hand down her face. “Merry Christmas. When are you here from?”

The other woman blatantly ignores the question. “You still got control of the time travel?”

“…Yes?” May answers slowly, and the other woman finally opens her eyes and looks over at her.

“Good. Enjoy it while it lasts.”
But before May has a chance to ask what she means, Jie is gone.

Skye:

If it weren’t so tragic, this would almost be funny.

May calls her from the police station to fill her and the others in on the details—Lady Sif doesn’t know who she is. She doesn’t recognize Coulson or May. She knows where she’s from, and that’s almost it.

Skye had already been running searches on the top social media sites from the last forty-eight hours since they landed, but it was on Twitter that she found the jackpot. She sends the video of Sif fighting the huge man to May’s tablet.

“Whatever she’s doing here, she seemed to know it yesterday,” she says into the phone wedged between her shoulder and ear.

May hums in agreement, silent as she watches the short video.

“We’ll see if this jogs her memory.”

Apparently, it doesn’t.

Coulson and May return a little while later with Sif in tow—she’s dressed in plainclothes instead of armor and looking around at the plane and everyone on it like she’s never seen any of it before. Going off a clue from the video where they see Sif’s sword slash the man’s chest just before he manages to hit her with his small hammer (that somehow renders her immobile enough for him to grab and toss into the water), Coulson delegates Bobbi and Skye to go to the local hospital and ask after anyone with injuries from the fight at the pier while he, May, and the rest of the team will head to the dock for more clues and testimonies.

Before she and Bobbi roll out in their separate car, May catches Skye’s hand and gives her a meaningful look.

“I’ll be fine,” Skye reassures her, nodding once.

I’ll be fine, she says again, to herself.

The coastal town is flat and cramped, squeezed into the lowlands between the hills and the sea, and even though it's winter solstice and the sun feels tired, the air is still gloriously fresh. Skye rolls down the window and breathes the warm, wet air, so refreshing after spending over a week underground at the Playground.

“Nice to be out of the zoo?” Bobbi says knowingly, steering their car expertly through the narrow streets.

“So nice,” Skye exhales, tipping her head back against the seat and closing her eyes.

“You been to Portugal before?” Bobbi asks casually.

Skye shakes her head. “Nope. Barely been to Europe at all.”

And the times she has been were memorable trips indeed…
Her first mission in Malta. Belarus, chasing Amador. Cleanup after Thor’s latest visit. The Beserker staff. The Hub. The horrible mission in Italy…

“So you’ve really only been with SHIELD a little over a year, right?” Skye feels Bobbi glance over, so she nods, opening her eyes.

“Yeah. Coulson and his team picked me up August last year and let me tag along for a few months. I got my badge just a couple of days before SHIELD fell.”

Bobbi sighs heavily. “Rotten timing,” she says apologetically. “Guess that anniversary’s coming up, isn’t it?”

Skye thinks back to the Christmas she and May spent in London and the mission that followed immediately after it.

“Yeah. Guess so.”

“And…you and May?” Bobbi asks glancing over again with a small smile on her face. “Is that anniversary coming up too?”

Skye bites her lip against a smile, glancing away. “Yeah, it was about a week after SHIELD fell.”

“So you guys only knew each other a few months and then got together, but Fitz and Simmons have known each other for years and they still can’t get their shit together?”

A little startled by this comment, Skye looks sharply over at Bobbi.

“Not that it’s any of your business, but they’ve both had a pretty rough year.”

Bobbi’s facing front again, but she shakes her head slightly. “Been a rough year for all of us.”

Skye’s read Bobbi’s file, has seen the impressive list of skills and achievements listed beneath the woman’s stats, and she recognizes that she’s sitting in a car with an agent who put a lot more of her life into SHIELD than Skye can understand. She may not be as old as Hartley or Coulson, but Bobbi also would have lost more than just her workplace that awful day a year ago.

“Where were you the day SHIELD fell?” Skye asks suddenly, realizing she has no idea what Bobbi was doing before she was undercover in Hydra this summer and fall.

“On a boat, if you can believe it,” Bobbi answers, guiding the car smoothly into a parking spot in front of the hospital.

The girl behind the information desk doesn’t know her own name. Skye and Bobbi share a look and then go in search of a big man carrying a tiny hammer.

May:

Skye hauls her into their bunk as soon as they’re both back on the plane and Simmons is tending to Bobbi’s injuries.

“The whole room was shaking,” Skye whispers, still looking rattled. “The gun exploded in my hand.”

“Why would the gun explode?” May repeats, feeling her brows pinch. “I thought all you were doing
was shaking the ground.”

“I don’t know, May!” Skye snaps in a whisper, pushing a stressed hand through her hair. “That’s what I thought, too. And then the guy threw Bobbi across the room, and I got scared, and I tried to fire my ICER at him…”

“And he got away,” May finishes.

Skye sighs and looks away, visibly frustrated. “Yeah. This is what I meant when I told you I’m afraid I’ll just be a liability around here.”

“Don’t get ahead of yourself,” May warns, catching Skye’s wrist and looking at her biometer. Skye’s pulse is back at a resting rate, but she clicks back through the last hour’s stats and sees that it hit 230 when she was at the hospital.

“Just sit out the rest of this mission,” May recommends, glancing up at Skye’s face and waiting until the girl meets her eyes. “We have enough people around—you don’t need to go back out.”

Skye nods, agreeing so quickly that May is almost disappointed the girl doesn’t have more faith in herself.

The pieces come together—cavas…keys …Llaves…Whitehall’s dig that turned up the Obelisk. At the mention of the 0-8-4, she and Skye glance at each other, but Skye says nothing other than telling Coulson that she doesn’t want to go after the Kree the next time they encounter him.

But May is there, so she gets to see the big man hauling the trunk out of the cave, gets to see the electric nets that Trip fires from their newest gun stun and immobilize him. She and Skye listen to the interrogation in the Cage for the flight back to base, but it’s not until the two of them, Coulson, the Kree, and Lady Sif are all standing around in the common area together that the real drama starts.

“I can restore her memory,” the alien insists, nodding at Sif, “but that truncheon only works when in my hands.”

“That’s convenient,” May mutters, wishing they had cuffs strong enough for an alien so that she could feel a little less on edge with him walking around their base.

She’s reminded of why as the man suddenly kicks the truncheon out of Coulson’s hand and jabs it into Sif’s chest as she lunges at him. The warrior goes stiff for a moment, but then the alien withdraws the truncheon and drops it to the floor, holding up his hands defensively.

“I’m sorry,” the Kree says, sounding a little tired, “but the argument was going nowhere.”

“You back with us?” Coulson asks, looking over at Sif while keeping his gun trained on the Kree.

“Yes,” the woman says slowly, looking around. “My memories have returned. I Lady Sif of Asgard, a friend of the SHIELD. You’re the son of Coul, you’re the time traveler,” she says, looking at May, before turning towards Skye, “and you’re…hers.”

May’s stomach swoops involuntarily at the sound of her secret being announced so carelessly to the room, but there’s no one new except the Kree around and no time to worry about that right now.

“So why are you here?” Coulson demands, also ignoring Sif’s words. “Both of you better start talking real quick.”

“Heimdall saw that a Kree had landed on your planet and tasked me with retrieving it,” Sif says,
glowering at the alien. “We know enough about Kree history to be concerned.”

“So you came to pick a fight?” the Kree says, not sounding all that surprised. “Well then if you know Kree history, perhaps you’ve heard the tale of terragenesis.”

May glances at Coulson and Skye, who look equally confused, but the alien and Asgardian are all but ignoring the rest of them now.”

“Of course,” Sif says, narrowing her eyes. “Ancient Kree descending on planets, altering the inhabitants to fight their wars.”

The Kree nods. “And Earth was one of them.”

Beside her, Skye’s face goes white. “Blue angels from the sky…” she says quietly, as if repeating words she’s heard before.

“You mean cannon fodder,” May mutters, disgusted.

“We needed killers,” the Kree corrects. “One vicious faction among the Kree genetically modified other creatures’ DNA. These modifications can be activated with terragin crystals.”

“But we know these torturous experiments failed,” Sif says coldly.

“Not on earth,” the alien corrects, not sounding at all proud. “Here, we had to shut them down. This faction had built a city. They brought with them the Diviners, which hold the crystals. Their plans were discovered and thwarted by the better of my kind, putting an end to that dark chapter of our past.”

“Until now,” Skye whispers, sounding horrified.

May shifts marginally closer to her until her foot barely nudges Skye’s on the ground. The girl seems frozen, unable to move.

“Eons ago,” Sif continues, “the Kree waged a very long war. Casualties were high, and they needed more soldiers.”

May considers their options.

If you and Skye run, you’re guilty.
If you walk out, you’re suspicious.
If you stay, you might be able to talk your way out of it.
As long as…

“The ancient signal has been triggered,” the Kree says, looking around at all of them again. “We must find the remaining Diviners, as well as anyone who’s transformed.”

May considers their options.

We drowned the temple where the Diviners are activated,” Coulson offers, “so that’s a plus. And we do know the woman who was changed.”

“So someone was transformed,” Sif says, stepping aggressively towards Coulson, her hand falling to the hilt of her sword. “A Kree slave warrior created? Have you put it down?”

“No,” May says firmly. “She disappeared.” Coulson glances at her, seeming to sense something off
in her tone, but he looks back at Sif without commenting.

“What do you know of her?” the warrior demands.

“We don’t know much about Raina’s transformation,” Coulson says, stepping coolly between Sif and Skye. “Skye and May witnessed it but didn’t see much.”

Sif rounds on them both. “You were there? What did you see?”

“I didn’t— I mean, nothing,” Skye stammers, and May edges in front of Skye.

“She went into a stone cocoon, but the Temple collapsed, so we didn’t see what happened after that.”

“And how did you survive this?” Sif demands, her eyes narrowing further.

There is a small tremor in the floor, and May forces herself to not glance over at Skye.

“I guess we’re just lucky,” she bites out, not backing down from Sif.

“The changes may not be on the surface,” the Kree says at her elbow, now surprisingly close, “but buried inside.” He looks pained. “You must understand, these creatures are weapons, abominations, even if they don’t know.”

The room is now undeniably shaking, dishes beginning to rattle off the shelves, the furniture knocking against the floor. Coulson, Sif, and the Kree look around, confused, but May turns to Skye, who is still white as a sheet, barely breathing. May puts a hand on her arm.

“Breathe,” she orders, sizing up their options once again.

A voice that May has not heard in her head in a long time drifts up from the past.

*She’s going to be scared. Take a knee, get down to her level—it will help.*

*And if not…just grab her and run like hell.*

She seizes Skye’s arm and bolts with her out the door.

Coulson will understand.

They pass both Fitz and Simmons as she races with her down the halls towards Vault D. Fitz sees the Kree in pursuit and runs for the arsenal, shouting to Mack and Bobbi, but Simmons is frozen, looking stricken. May hears crashes behind her as they run, and she hopes that means that their team is still doing their best to protect them. She snatches the tablet off the shelf by the door as she hauls Skye down the stairs into Ward’s old cell, pushing her into the far corner before turning to activate the forcefield. The opaque barrier appears, not fritzing yet, despite the intensity of the tremors still rattling the base.

May sucks in as deep a breath as she can manage, then spins towards Skye and climbs onto the bed with her, crouching on her knees and leaning close.

“Hey, listen to me,” she whispers, forcing her voice not to shake. One hand lands on Skye’s shoulder, the other on her knee. The girl’s whole body is shaking. “Just me. We can do this. You can do this.”

_You have to do this because I don’t know how to help you…_
“I can’t!” Skye gasps, her eyes flashing wide in terror. Scared brown eyes that May has seen before on a different girl… “I can’t make it stop!”

“Come on, Skye, just like we practiced!” May says, tightening her grip, shoving away images of another girl, another gifted… “Just focus! Look at me, Skye, it will stop.”

*It has to…this can’t end the way it did before…this has to be different than…*

Sif’s sword suddenly stabs through the barrier, and the forcefield shudders, flickering horribly.

“Agent May!” the warrior’s voice rings from the other side. “Release the girl!”

May leaps to her feet, stepping between Skye and the sword.

“May, she’ll get through!” Skye whimpers from behind her.

“Ignore it,” May orders, raising her fists and thinking through which moves she can manage with bare fists against a sword. “Remember! Focus!”

*I don’t know what else to do…*

Behind her, Skye sounds close to tears. “I can’t!”

The barrier abruptly vanishes, revealing Sif with her sword raised in a jab, and at the same moment, May feels weight disappear off her hip. She barely has time in the half-second that she spins to process Skye raising the gun towards her shoulder and pulling the trigger.

There is a pop, a puff of blue smoke, and Skye crashes to the bed like a fallen tree.

“Skye!”

She turns her back on the one with the sword, rushing to the bed and falling on Skye. Her fingers dig for a pulse point as she brushes back her hair, seeing the blue lines staining her skin…

“She harmed herself,” Sif says disbelievingly. “All to save the rest of you.”

May’s probing fingers find a heartbeat hammering beneath Skye’s skin. She pulls in her first breath since the gunshot, stomach twisting so horribly she nearly gags.

“Don’t you see?” Coulson’s voice rings down from the stairs as he descends. “She wants to get better. If you take her away from the people she loves, she’ll only get worse.”

May hears a sword sliding into a sheath. She looks back and sees Coulson holstering his gun too, looking shaken and just a little bit hurt.

“Let’s get her out of the basement, May,” he says quietly, and May nods, turning back towards Skye and slipping an arm beneath her head.

Another memory fills her mind, and she freezes, suddenly unable to move…

“Allow me,” Sif says behind her, and if May thought she could do better, she might have protested. As it is, she can barely put one foot in front of the other to follow as Sif lifts Skye carefully in her strong arms and turns towards the stairs.

The other teammates see their procession, but Coulson walks ahead of Sif, assuaging the horrified looks.
“Skye’s fine. She’s safe,” he says to Trip, to Simmons, to Bobbi, as they pass.

He leads them through the halls to May and Skye’s room, and Sif lays the girl gently down on their unmade bed. As she straightens, May sees her glance around at the shared space, processing quickly who it belongs to.

Her gaze lands on May, and the warrior purses her lips.

“I remember what you told me before,” she says, “about your time traveling. I am assuming that you did not have an additional change from your encounter with the crystals?”

May glances at Coulson, who is also looking at her expectantly, then trains her gaze on the carpet between them. “I can direct my travel now,” she says. “I can control when and where I go. But I haven’t noticed any other change.”

“Small miracles,” Sif says, looking back towards Skye. “I can leave the girl in your protection and take the Kree with me back to Asgard. You mentioned another woman who was also transformed—I can only assume you are doing your best to track her?”

“We are,” Coulson says firmly, but May still can’t make herself look at him. When Sif sighs and folds her arms, though, she looks up and sees the warrior now looking steadily at her.

“I respect your commitment to your leaders, Agent May, and to her,” Sif says, glancing once towards Skye. “But you must realize that you are dealing with something that, to our knowledge, no one in your world has had experience with for millennia.”

May looks over at Skye, thinking of another brown-haired girl, another mystery, another gun…

“I know you wish to affect the outcome,” Sif continues, and May looks up at her again, “but there are tides in the universe that you cannot swim against.”

“You think this is part of something bigger?” Coulson asks beside her, and Sif looks over at him.

“Things such as this always are,” she says certainly. “The only question is how long we must wait to see it.”

Sif straightens her shoulders, touching the hilt of her sword and addressing Coulson again. “If you will allow me to fetch the prisoner, I will need only transport out of your base so that we can access our Bifrost.”

Coulson nods. “Thank you, Lady Sif,” he says quietly. “We’ll do our best to take care of Skye.”

“That, I am sure of,” Sif says, marching past him and opening the door herself. “The question, however, is whether your best will be enough.”

Sif leaves the door open behind her, but May feels Coulson lingering over her shoulder.

“You don’t have to tell me everything,” he says quietly. “You’ve never had to. I just want to remind you that I do care about both of you. We’ll figure this out together.”

She hears him moving towards the door.

“I’ll take Trip and we’ll drive Sif and the Kree out of town,” he says. “You stay with her. We’ll talk when I get back.”

He closes the door behind himself, and May is alone with Skye and their demons.
Skye:

She wakes up with a pounding headache and an ice pack stuck over the awful ache on her collarbone.

“How are you feeling?” a low voice at her shoulder asks, and she looks around to realize that she’s back in their bedroom, May sitting on the bed beside her.

“It hurts,” she exhales, attempting to sit up. A dull ache spasms through her ribs when she takes a deep breath, and she winces, coughing once. “Where’s Sif?”

“Gone, and the Kree too,” May says, a steadying hand landing on Skye’s shoulder. “Take it easy.”

Once she is sitting upright, propped against their pillows, May carefully pushes back the collar of Skye’s shirt to look at the ice pack. When she looks up, her gaze is stern.

“Don’t ever do that again.”

“I knew it was just an ICER, May,” Skye says quietly, nudging May’s hand away and straightening her shirt. “I’m not suicidal anymore—you don’t have to worry about that. But I couldn’t stop the shaking, and I was afraid of what Sif might do to you—”

“We wouldn’t have let her take you.”

“I know. And that’s why I’m so scared.”

The tears that were lurking throughout the final moments before she pulled the trigger on herself are back, pressing insistently against her eyes and demanding a moment. Skye covers her face with both hands, taking several steadying breaths before she trusts herself to speak again.

“I don’t want to be the reason more people get hurt, May. My father nearly killed Trip, then he almost beat Coulson to death in Puerto Rico. Sif and the Kree were only here because of what happened in the Temple, and then Bobbi got hurt and Sif might have killed you…”

“None of that is on you,” May says quietly, her hand curling gently around Skye’s knee, but Skye can’t look at her.

“What if I cause a bigger accident that hurts more people? What if I pull down the base on top of us?” she whispers, horrifying thoughts that she’s tried not to entertain but has nonetheless considered.

“We’ll work on your self-control,” May insists. “The others know you don’t want to hurt anyone.”

But Skye suddenly knows where she needs to go.

“I’ll stay out in the plane,” she says, getting quickly to her feet, ignoring the way her head pounds and the stab of pain in her shoulder. “In the Cage. It should be far enough away from everything else, far enough that the others feel safe, and maybe the walls will keep the shaking from getting out…”

She finds her old linen duffle and starts throwing clothes and other things into it. May doesn’t protest, but Skye is very aware of the silence as she packs her bag.

Are you not going to try to stop me?
She hears May shift off the bed too, moving around on her side of the room, still saying nothing, and when Skye finally turns around to grab her phone charger off the nightstand, she sees May stuffing her own clothes into a second duffle.

“What…”

“I told you, Skye,” May says quietly, facing her as she zips her bag closed. “I know it doesn’t solve the problem, but as long as I’m not making anything worse…” She meets Skye’s eyes. “I love you. And I’m not going anywhere.”

There is something about the way May says those words, something that sounds as if May is speaking defiantly to someone who isn’t in this room, but these are the words Skye needs to hear right now, so she’ll claim them as hers. She tries again uselessly to hold back the flood of emotion that overfills any space she had left in her, but holding things in hasn’t done good things for her today, so she just gives up and ducks her head as she reaches out for May. Familiar arms slip around her in a steady embrace, and Skye collapses against the most solid person she knows, trying not to think about what happens when unstoppable forces meet immovable objects.

There was a time—twenty years of time—when all she wanted May to do was stay. Now, Skye’s relief and gratitude aren’t quite enough to cancel out the seed of fear threading its roots deeper into her with every passing hour. But May is here, will be here wherever this leads, and whether or not that will be enough is not the question Skye wants to ask right now, but it is the foundation she knows she can stand on.

A foundation that she hasn’t shaken.

Yet.

Chapter End Notes

Family reunion next chapter should be fun...stay tuned, monkeys. :)}
December 22, 2014—Skye is 25, May is 45

She’s a little confused by the sight of the honeycomb pattern of the wall and her vantage point so close to the floor when she wakes up to the sound of knocking, but it only takes a few seconds for Skye to remember the move out to the Cage the night before and the ensuing argument over who would sleep on the cot and who would take the extra mattress on the floor. Last night, she thought she’d won when she’d flopped down onto it and fallen asleep in moments thanks to the lingering dendrotoxins in her system. But now she can feel May uncurling from around her body and fumbling for her phone, and the cot beside them is still made up, unused.

“We’re ridiculous,” Skye mumbles, smiling blurrily at May as the woman heaves herself up and goes to the door.

“If you two are decent, I have breakfast,” she hears Coulson saying on the other side of the vibranium barrier, and Skye drags a hand over her face and sits up, glad she slept fully-clothed.

“Didn’t know what your plan was for the morning,” their director says as May opens the door for him to come through, a tray balanced in one hand, “but Trip and Bobbi said you never made it to the gym this morning, so I figured it must be a cheat day.”

Skye sits up on the bed as May steps back to let him in, smiling sleepily.

“Is my boss seriously bringing me breakfast in bed?” she says, swinging her pajama-clad legs off the mattress and clambering to her feet.

“No, you’re going to eat at the table like a civilized animal,” Coulson says, smiling at Skye. There seem to be a few new wrinkles of worry, but she can tell that he’s putting on a brave face for her. “Waffles on the mattress is a disaster waiting to happen.”

There’s tea for May, coffee for her, and a stack of homemade waffles with a bowl of hot syrup beside it. Skye nearly hugs him, but an annoying voice in the back of her mind reminds her that this breakfast is likely an attempt to sugar-coat something else that’s coming later.

When she sees May watching Coulson carefully over her tea and mirroring his move of sitting down at the table, Skye decides to just rip the band-aid off.

“Well, this feels like the kind of convo I usually run from,” she says with forced levity, picking up a waffle just to give her hands something to do and taking the empty chair. “But I think we all know what this about, AC, so just tell me. Am I going on the Index?”

Coulson visibly cringes, but May just stares down into her tea.

“That’s what I’m here to talk about,” her director admits, sounding sad underneath his matter-of-fact tone.

She tries not to look disappointed as she finally takes a bite of her waffle, trying to make it easier on him. *You knew this was coming, Skye*...
“I get it,” she sighs as she pulls over her cup of coffee. “I suppose if there’s any unexplained earthquakes, everyone in SHIELD ought to know who’s to blame.”

“Everyone in the base already knows without anyone announcing it,” Coulson says. “With abilities like this, it’s not worth trying to keep a secret.”

“So, what happens now?” Skye asks, setting her half-eaten waffle over the top of her coffee mug, trapping the warmth beneath it. “Do I get sequestered somewhere until I have a better handle on things?”

“Protocol is that we do a psych eval and threat assessment,” Coulson says, and those words finally make May look up. His gaze doesn’t linger on hers, but an unspoken message seems to pass between them.

“I hate talking to shrinks,” Skye sighs, thinking of the parade of counselors and therapists she’d seen throughout her childhood. Every few years as they updated her adoption file, then a lot more often after her suicide attempt…

“It’s not personal; it’s protocol,” Coulson reminds her, pulling Skye back to the present.

“You’re the Director,” May mutters, finally joining the discussion. “You can let her skip that step.”

“I could,” he acknowledges, “but I don’t need one more reason for our people to accuse me of favoritism.”

There’s a hint of something under those words too, something that tells Skye that he and May have already had conversations about this, conversations she hasn’t been allowed to hear.

“And then what?” Skye prompts, glancing between the two of them, pulling their attention back to her. “I air my dirty to a laundry to a stranger, and then what?”

Coulson doesn’t look away, but she can tell he wants to. “And then we do our best,” he promises, reaching out to briefly touch her hand. “If anyone can figure this out, it’s you.”

He doesn’t stay for long after that, leaving the plate of waffles but taking their empty mugs with him as he stands and heads for the door.

“May, I’ll need to talk to you for a second out here,” he says without looking at either of them as he makes his way to the door.

May’s got her poker face on, but Skye still hears the grimace in her voice as she answers, “Fine.”

She’s back after only a few minutes, not offering any explanation as she pulls clean clothes out of her duffel and goes out to one of the bunks to get dressed (out of sight of the cameras).

“Is Coulson sending you to pick up my shrink?” Skye asks as May comes back in and tosses her t-shirt and yoga pants into her duffel, zips it, and stuffs the bag behind Skye’s in the corner.

“Yeah,” May says tiredly, avoiding her eyes as she straightens the sheets on the mattress at her feet before shoving it beneath the cot, out of the way.

“Is it someone local?” Skye asks, getting to her feet as May picks up her leather jacket and pulls it on. “Or are you taking a jet?”

“Jet,” May answers, bending to pull on her shoes, “but he’s not far away. If he agrees to come in, we
should be back in just a couple of hours.”

“He must owe you guys a favor if he’d do a house call like this, especially right before Christmas,” Skye says, folding her arms.

“That’s why we’re not waiting until tomorrow,” May says, finally meeting Skye’s eyes. She moves closer, slipping a gentle hand around the back of Skye’s neck as she leans in to kiss her lips. Skye mirrors the gesture and reaches up to clutch the collar of May’s jacket, holding her in the kiss until she remembers the cameras in both corners of the Cage and quickly pulls back. When she opens her eyes, May smiles in a way that tells Skye she knows why, but she just straightens her jacket and picks up her phone off the bed.

“Do some tai chi and a workout before I get back,” she orders with a raised eyebrow as she turns to go. “I don’t need you taking the whole day off.”

“I love you,” Skye says instead of agreeing, settling down on the cot and pulling her computer onto her lap.

“Love you too,” May returns on her way out the door.

May:

Coulson had been clear when they’d talked on the plane before she left the Base—Andrew was their best option. He was the most familiar with SHIELD, the most trusted by Coulson (and, she grudgingly agreed, herself), and even geographically the nearest. He was also the most likely to agree on short notice; otherwise, they would probably have to wait until after Christmas to get someone to come out to meet with Skye.

None of those reasons made this situation feel any less strange.

He hadn’t said much when he’d spotted her outside of his building, approaching her with an expression that said he was less than excited to see her. She’d cut right to the chase—SHIELD needs your help. He’d only nodded, turning away but gesturing for her to follow.

His office is still in the same place, though she can see a few more years of textbooks and psych journals stuffing the shelves. Her eyes go first to the places where she knows evidence of her had once been—the framed wedding photo that sat on the shelf directly behind his desk, her personal tea mug that he kept on the shelf near his coffeepot, the potted plant that he’d tried to bring home once but that she had stuck back in his office insisting it was more likely survive if he took care of it himself… All those things are gone now. Though this observation doesn’t surprise her, the painful feeling that squeezes her heart does.

You moved on, Melinda. Did you think he wouldn’t too?

“There’s a seat,” Andrew says, moving around his desk towards the chair that she remembers picking out with him when his last one had finally become too creaky to be professional…

She stays standing.

“We’ve got an agent that had an encounter with alien technology last week,” she says without prelude, holding out the file to him. “Since then, she’s been manifesting new abilities, and we’ll most likely be placing her on the Gifted Index.”
Andrew gives her a cool look as he takes the file, not sitting down before flipping it open. His face remains expressionless as he starts to read, shifting away from her and starting to pace the room. Though it feels counterintuitive, she makes herself sit.

_This is his space. Let him feel like he’s the one in charge here._

“So SHIELD does still exist,” he finally says from a few feet behind her, and she turns around to see him still looking down at the file. “I mean, I had a feeling, but you all haven’t exactly been making headlines since January…”

“There’s not a lot I can tell you—“

“I know, Melinda,” he cuts her off, glancing up and meeting her eyes once. “I assumed that was still the case.”

It was always ‘Melinda’ with Andrew. Never May. Never Mel.

_Melinda._

He shifts slowly back towards his desk, still reading.

“Coulson’s the Director now,” she says, hoping this will get a little more of a reaction.

Andrew looks up with only raised eyebrows though before nodding once. “Well, good for him,” he mutters, reaching out and swiveling his desk chair in order to sit down.

“So protocol is still Indexing people who meet the criteria?” he says thoughtfully, dropping into the chair and placing Skye’s open file on his desk between them.

May nods once.

“And you’re still in SHIELD, but still not on that Index?”

Their eyes meet, and she’s having trouble reading if he’s concerned or suspicious. Maybe it’s both.

“I’m not,” she answers, deciding that’s all he needs to hear. He nods once in response, looking down at the file again.

“So is this Skye…that bad?” he asks, a question beneath the question—_More dangerous than a pilot who disappears without warning?_

May answers both. “She’s that good. A good agent.” She hesitates for a moment before adding, “I’m her S.O.”

_True both ways…_

But he doesn’t seem to be reading too much into that. “So you’re back in the field,” Andrew observes, staring at her.

She nods, then looks down at the file between them. “So, what do you think?”

“I think…” he abruptly flips the file shut again and pushes it a few inches back towards her. “What the hell, Melinda?”

The brusqueness in his voice is surprising, but May schools her expression to show no reaction.
“You show up asking for a favor,” Andrew goes on, leaning back in his chair and staring her down, “but when I called after SHIELD fell to check if you were all right? Not a word.”

Did you even consider calling him? May asks herself, trying to recall those blurry, chaotic days following the fall of SHIELD. The Hub, Providence, New York, DC, LA, Havana, Cybertek, the Playground, Skye…

“It was a busy time,” she finally replies calmly.

“Busy,” Andrew repeats, making a tired face towards the ceiling. “Yeah, all right. Thanks for the apology.”

If she thought he actually wanted to hear anything about the past year, she might have attempted to tell him what she could. But she can see that this is all he wanted—a moment where she had to hear him before she ran away again.

“If I do this,” he says, leaning forward and resting one fingertip on Skye’s file, “I have conditions.”

May narrows her eyes but waits patiently.

“No observation, no monitoring beyond what’s deemed medically necessary,” Andrew lists, looking at her sternly, as if she’s the one who gets to give the ok. “My sessions with her aren’t private; my evaluation won’t be. She gets a copy. My duty is to her. I’m not SHIELD.”

And that used to be what I thought would save me from the worst SHIELD could bring.

I just never thought I bring it to you, too.

She gets to her feet, picking up the file of the second chance she never thought she’d have.

“Like I said,” she mutters, forcing herself to meet his eyes, “it’s a different SHIELD.”

She offers her hand for a shake.

Say yes.

Say no.

He shakes her hand, and she doesn’t know what to feel.

“My consultation fee has gone up,” Andrew says like a friendly warning.

“Well, SHIELD still pays in cash,” she says, holding Skye’s file in two hands. “Coulson asked me to bring you in today if you can clear your afternoon. We could have you back home before dinner.”

Andrew lifts his chin, reaching for his satchel on the floor beside him.

“I’ll pack light.”

May considers for the dozenth time telling him the one detail—the one very important detail —about Skye that she knows she’s omitting.

“I should have called you,” she says instead.

“Nah, I talked to your mom,” Andrew says as swings his bag over his shoulder and moves with her towards the door. “She told me you were alive, we had a nice talk, invited me over for dinner…” His
tone is the friendliest it’s been so far today.

“I’m not surprised,” May mutters with a tight smirk, thinking of her mother and how she might react to the person she’s about to take Andrew to see. “She still hasn’t forgiven me for divorcing you.”

Skye:

She’s only alone in the Cage with her laptop for about an hour before company joins her.

Trip is wearing basketball shorts and a t-shirt and smells like he’s already done his daily workout when she opens the door to his knock.

“Gym too small for you?” Skye asks, looking him up and down.

“Nah girl, I nearly had the place to myself this morning,” he says with a grin, stepping into the room. “Though I was trying not to overdo it—don’t need another round of ripped stiches.” He gestures to one side of his chest, where the corner of a bandage is visible above the collar of his shirt, and Skye’s smile flickers a little as she remembers who is the reason he has those healing wounds.

“Everyone else sleep in, too?” she asks, shutting the door again.

Trip shrugs. “Not sure where Mack and Hunter are hiding today, but Bobbi was the only other one around.”

“You here to visit the invalid then?” Skye asks, sitting back down on her bed and gesturing for him to take a chair at the table. “Because if you’re just here to hang, then I’m gonna need you to take a shower first.”

“That’s cold,” Trip says with a hidden smile, leaning back in the chair. “Holding off on that because May asked me to make sure you didn’t just laze around all day while she’s gone. But if you just want to do a few pushups and call it good, I’ll lie for you.”

Skye smiles then, surprised by how relieved she feels to see someone treating her like before.

“You’ve gotta do them with me,” she says, climbing off the bed and stepping back into a corner of the room so that they each have enough space. Trip nods gamely, standing up and getting down into push-up position beside the cot.

“Thirty,” he says, catching her eye.


The pushups do wake her up and make her feel a little bit better, so she offers Trip the leftover waffles while she starts taking herself through her strength-training routine, using the furniture when she needs to.

“So, is Puerto Rico to blame for this rock n’ roll craziness?” Trip asks as she does a set of tricep dips off table next to him.

Skye doesn’t look at him, focusing on counting, but she nods.

“What happened in the temple with Raina is the real culprit,” she says when she finishes, switching to the floor to do a set of pushups with her feet up on the seat of the other chair. “Whatever was inside the Obelisk did this to me.”
“But May was in there with you two,” Trip reminds her unnecessarily, from above her. “And nothing happened to her?”

Skye doesn’t answer again, just shakes her head, glad she doesn’t have to look him in the eye.

12, 13, 14...

Trip shrugs, reaching for another waffle.

“Well, not that creating earthquakes isn’t terrifying, but I’m sure glad you made it out all right.”

Skye nods, shooting him a grateful smile.

18, 19, 20.

“Too bad you didn’t join the party,” she says as she finishes and finally exhales, lying down on her back to rest for a moment before she starts bicycle crunches. “You could have come out with a cool party trick too.”

“I’ll stick to my slight-of-hand, thanks,” he says with an easy smile, and Skye glances at the empty plate beside him.

“Want to be a friend and magically refill that plate with lunch?” she teases, a little surprised when he actually picks up the plate and moves towards the door.

“Ten bucks says you’ll want seconds of what I’m going to whip up,” he calls over his shoulder on his way out.

“Twenty!” Skye calls back, resuming her crunches.

They’re almost done with lunch (pita stuffed with an assortment of vegetables Skye didn’t even know they had in the base and some of the best grilled chicken she’s ever had) when she hears the hangar above them open and a jet coming in for a landing. Trip seems to notice her pause her chewing, because he looks pointedly over at her.

“Hey,” he says, drawing her gaze. “Doesn’t matter what any doctor says. You’re still Skye, and you’re still SHIELD. Nothing’s gonna change that.”

Skye smiles at him gratefully. “Thanks, Trip. That means a lot to me.”

He stays and keeps her mind off it until May suddenly appears in the doorway, one look telling Trip that his time is up. He takes their lunch dishes, leaving Skye with a pat on the shoulder and a final reassuring look.

May doesn’t beat around the bush once the door is closed again.

“The therapist agreed. He’s going to sit down with you today.”

Skye folds her arms but just nods, resigned.

“Hope he’s not one of the creepy Freudian types.”

May shakes her head. “No, he’s pretty friendly. One of the better ones SHIELD has ever worked with.” She nods towards the cameras in the corner of the room, which Skye suddenly realizes are dark and lifeless. “He also requested no monitoring, so the cameras will be off as long as he’s around. This evaluation is for you, not for SHIELD, he said.”
Skye glances up at May, her brows knitting together. “If it’s all for me, then I’m saying I don’t want one, so go put him back where you found him.”

“Skye,” May says tiredly, closing her eyes.

“May, I would rather get shot again—“ The sharpness in May’s gaze when she opens her eyes at those words make Skye backpedal immediately though. “No, no, no, maybe not that. I’d rather do another thousand pushups and eat a bowl of dryer lint than talk to a stranger about all this.”

May’s gaze has a little more sympathy when Skye faces her again. “Well, Andrew’s done this before. He gets agents. You’ll like him.”

“How do you know?” Skye challenges, folding her arms across her chest.

May glances away like she’s trying to decide if she should say something, but looks pointedly at Skye again. “I liked him enough to marry him,” she says with a shrug.

A long moment of silence follows.

When she finally gets her words working again, Skye can barely do more than gape.

“You have to be shitting me,” she says slowly. “First of all, oh my god—you were married to a shrink? But second, your current girlfriend in a secret spy organization is a walking natural disaster and needs a psych eval so you brought in your ex-husband…”

“Like I said,” May cuts her off, “he’s someone we trust.”

But Skye still can’t get past this. “You really want me to talk to your ex about…”

“You can talk about whatever you want to talk about,” May cuts her off again, shrugging slightly. “I didn’t tell him who we are to one another—if you feel like he ought to know, then that’s up to you.”

This throws Skye a little.

She didn’t tell him? Thanks May—way to pass the buck…

“Do you want me to keep it a secret?” she asks, folding her arms.

May glances away, seeming unsure what to say, but when she looks back at Skye, she looks sincere.

“I think you should be allowed to pick your own battles when you can.”

They’re both quiet for a moment before May asks, “Do you need some time to yourself first? Or would you rather get this over with?”

Skye glances up at the dead camera in the corner and makes her decision. “Give me two minutes to get dressed.”

May:

The session lasts for just over an hour.

With the cameras in the Cage turned off, there’s no way to listen in, so May keeps herself distracted by curling up on one of the Bus’s sofas and texting Coulson for updates on the break-in at Brynmore
prison, the one he’s following up on with Bobbi. Cameras at the facility’s gate show Skye’s father (Oh great; just what this day needed…) and a merry band of misfits taking out the guard and breaking through the security measures. Things are under control, but one very high-risk prisoner is missing, and the phrase Fight on was left spray-painted on the wall of his empty cell.

What the hell is that supposed to mean? May types back in response to the photo Coulson sends her.

His reply seems equally unamused. I’ll let you know when I figure it out. Don’t tell Skye.

May purses her lips but replies concisely. Copy that.

When she eventually hears the creaking of the Cage door, May jumps to her feet, slipping through the cabin over to the landing where Andrew is exiting.

“I’ll make sure you get a copy of my assessment before I go,” she hears him saying when she gets close enough.

“Thanks,” Skye says, sounding like she’s the one holding the door open for him. She still doesn’t sound completely relaxed, but she doesn’t sound angry or scared, which May takes as a good sign.

She steps into view and sees Skye leaning tiredly against the metal door as Andrew makes his way out.

“You need anything?” May asks Skye, trying to discern what the two of them have discussed. But Skye only shakes her head.

“You know where to find me,” she shrugs, pushing the door closed again.

Andrew doesn’t speak first, which is strange, but May gives into her curiosity before they’ve even made it down the Bus’s ramp.

“So, how did it go?” She tries to sound innocent.

Beside her, Andrew sighs heavily. “Really, Melinda?”

And that’s how she knows that he knows.

Instead of offering him coffee when they get down to the kitchen, she pulls down two tumblers.

“Single or double?”

He doesn’t comment on day-drinking. Before their divorce, it had been one of the only things left that they both still enjoyed.

He takes a slow drink before acknowledging the elephant in the room.

“So how long have you been together?”

May sighs, folding her arms over her ribs, her own glass tucked under on elbow. “About a year.”

“So it was a busy time.”

She almost rolls her eyes but takes a sip of her drink instead.

“You could have warned me,” Andrew mutters, leaning back on the counter.
“I could’ve,” she admits, meeting his eyes. “I didn’t want it to keep you from saying yes to helping her, though.”

“Not exactly the person I imagined you moving on with,” Andrew says, taking another drink, and May actually does roll her eyes.

“You knew I had exes that weren’t all men.” It wasn’t something she had been secretive about when they were dating.

“That’s not what I’m talking about,” Andrew says, shaking his head. “She’s…”

She hears the obvious word she assumes he doesn’t want to say and finishes for him. “Younger?”

“Not Coulson.”

This throws her for a moment, and May stands frozen with her glass in her hand for so long that Andrew is the one who breaks the silence.

“You look good, you know,” he says sincerely, an obvious olive branch, and May finally meets his eyes again. “Better, anyway. Seems like she’s been good for you.”

“Seems like moving on has been good for you too,” she offers, a weak attempt even for her, but she can’t think of anything except the frame she saw on his desk.

They drink for a moment in silence, and when the ground suddenly pulses with a distant tremor, May doesn’t know whether she’s terrified or relieved. She just slams her glass down on the counter and takes off for the hangar.

Skye:

May ushers Fitz and Simmons out once the tremor stops rattling the plane around her, but Dr. Garner says he’s staying and Skye can tell she doesn’t get to say no. She’s guessing by the way May gripped her hand in front of him as she frantically woke Skye up that they’re not really bothering with secrecy anymore—she’s not sure at what point he caught onto the two of them, but he didn’t seem too surprised by May’s gesture. Still, she keeps her eyes on her heart rate monitor as she works through her relaxing techniques, and Dr. Garner waits quietly, leaning against the table.

“How are you doing that?” he eventually asks, obviously noticing the slowing of the cadence of beeps.

“May taught me,” Skye says, still not looking at him. “You focus on a single point. Let everything else become noise disappearing in the background.”

“But it doesn’t disappear, you’re just pushing it aside,” the man says, pulling one of the chairs from the table to sit down in front of her, though still a few feet away. “Which is why when you were dreaming, the tremors started.”

“That’s never happened before,” Skye says firmly, finally meeting his eyes.

Well, Skye, you also haven’t fallen asleep without May next to you since this started…

“What were you dreaming about?”
She knows exactly what she was dreaming about, but the last thing she wants to do is talk about it. He tolerates her dawdling and deflecting for a minute or two, but the finally cuts through the smokescreen with a directness that feels familiar.

“All you’re doing right now is trying to run from the truth.” Dr. Garner’s voice is very calm, but she hears the weight of certainty under his words. “You’re different now, Skye. You have abilities, abilities triggered by pain, and either you face that or you don’t sleep again.”

Skye gazes steadily at him, narrowing her eyes. “Sounds like you’ve said that to someone before.”

His poker face isn’t as good as May’s, but she can tell it’s still well-practiced.

“Exactly how did you two get together?” he asks then, leaning back in his chair.

Not on your life, Doc. That’s not a story you get to hear.

“I dreamed I was on mission,” Skye answers instead, looking down at her hands, which now ache a little for some reason. “I was looking through the scope of her rifle. The next thing I knew I was on the other side and the rifle was trained on me.”

“Well, that’s pretty on point, going from being an agent to being—”

“Yeah, to being on the Index,” Skye says, looking up at him again, pushing aside memories of the last time she pulled the trigger of her sniper rifle. “And I know SHIELD’s policy on gifted people. I’ve executed that policy.”

The room’s furniture suddenly starts rattling, and Skye looks around, confused by the sounds she can hear filtering through the vibranium walls.

“Skye, I need you to calm down,” she hears Dr. Garner saying, but she looks over at him, confused.

“This isn’t me,” she says certainly. “I’m not doing this. The plane is taking off.”

Dr. Garner stands, a look of pained dread washing over his features as he heads for the door.

“Stay here. I’ll find out what this is about.”

He’s gone for a while, and Skye gets impatient once she feels the plane stop climbing and still no one’s come in to explain what’s going on. Heaving the Cage door open, she heads for the cockpit, but she hears Andrew and May at the holocom as soon as she rounds the corner.

“That ‘not talking’ thing you do? Not okay when we were married, but definitely not okay now!”

“Not okay is Skye’s lunatic father leading Coulson into a trap!”

Oh Christ, Cal’s back?

“Civilians could be hurt,” May is saying, sounding more defensive than Skye’s ever heard. “I acted quickly!”

“And me and Skye, we do what?” Dr. Garner demands, sounding so over this situation already.

“The same as if we were on base. Stay in the cage, continue your evaluation.”

“That’s so not gonna happen.”
They both seem startled to see her, and she guesses that means she’s gotten better at sneaking around with May’s level of stealth.

“This is not a negotiation, Skye,” May says firmly, taking a step towards her. “You’re staying on the Bus.”

“May, if Coulson needs backup—“

“He’ll have it,” she says, a warning look in her eyes begging Skye to not continue this argument. “We don’t need you.”

But Skye shakes her head. “Yes, you do. My father’s involved, and for better or worse, I matter to him, so we can use that.”

May looks stricken, but she’s listening, so Skye presses forward with the logic she knows will sway her.

“You put me on the Index. You’re doing my intake assessment. How about we let my dad know?”

They land in Wisconsin not a moment too soon—Coulson is standing at the fifty-yard line of a high school football field between her father and a couple of metahumans as May puts the cloaked plane down in a field beside the school.

“You’re not staying on the plane alone,” May says to Andrew as she marches out from the cockpit, still looking like she would rather be anywhere but in this situation. “But you’d better stay out of the way.”

Andrew doesn’t respond, and Skye almost feels sorry for him.

I’m sure this isn’t how he thought this day would go…

They creep up to the field, and Skye uses the cover of darkness to catch and squeeze May’s hand once. “Tell Cal whatever you want,” she mutters. “I don’t want to talk to him. I won’t correct you if you lie to him. Just…don’t tell him who you are to me.”

May looks at war with herself as she finally faces Skye, just out of view of Cal and the others.

“We’re going to have to make this look convincing,” her S.O. says sadly, unholstering her gun, and Skye reaches out and squeezes her arm gently until May looks at her.

“I trust you, May,” she whispers, wishing she could kiss her. “Do what you think is best.”

May spins her suddenly and catches her arm in a tight grip, barring her arm across Skye’s chest and pressing the end of her ICER beneath to the side of her neck.

“I love you,” she whispers in the softest, most apologetic voice before giving Skye a shove forward, towards Coulson and Cal.

“Daisy,” the man says when he sees her. “What have they done to you?”

December 23, 2014

May:
Skye’s father is gone, disappeared with the same man who took Raina back in San Juan. The escapees are locked up again, and the high school bystanders are safe.

Skye, however, is still under sedation while Jemma binds up her arms in compression casts.

Given that the staff at hand when Skye collapsed was herself, Andrew, and Coulson, there wasn’t much to be done before they got a medic on site. Coulson got Simmons on the phone while they waited, and Trip got airborne with her in the quinjet immediately, meeting them only minutes after local law enforcement and emergency services arrived at the high school. Coulson, Trip, and Bobbi have stayed behind to do cleanup, but May has not left Skye’s side since she skidded onto the turf next to her motionless form. With the persuasion of their SHIELD badges, the EMTs had left Skye in Simmons’s care after stabilizing her, though they did order X-rays and CT scans as soon as possible (“She looks like the girl we saw last week who got hit by a truck…”).

Skye had been barely woken throughout the flight back to base and Simmons’s work with the medical staff. Once the X-ray films developed, thought, Simmons had ordered Skye a sedative in a stricken voice, which one of the other medics hastily injected into her arm.

“Talk to me, Simmons,” May demanded, hovering at the fringe of the activity around Skye, hands balled into anxious fists.

“She’ll be fine, May,” Simmons had said immediately, looking up at her. “But she’s probably in a lot of pain. I’ll explain in a moment.”

When she does, guilt squeezes May’s stomach until she thinks she might be sick.

Andrew is still there when Skye wakes up a couple of hours later. It must be after dawn by now, but May hasn’t left the Cage since Simmons had ordered the medics to bring Skye back into it (“Just in case she dreams… loudly again…”).

Skye seems only confused as she stares at the bruises on her hands and the casts on her arms.

“You weren’t stopping your powers, Skye,” Andrew says so that May doesn’t have to. “You were directing them inward.”

Skye looks overwhelmed, her gaze sliding between her broken arms, her doctors, and May…

“What am I supposed to do?” she asks, sounding lost.

Simmons starts explaining about the special casts she’s made, but May cuts her off.

“That’s not what she means, Simmons.”

Skye finally looks up at her, looking like a child who has just broken something valuable and is afraid to face its owner.

Guilty?

Oh, Skye. This isn’t your fault.

“We’ll figure this out,” she whispers, wishing so badly that she could gather her into her arms and comfort her, press in reassurance and enough promises to heal everything that’s broken.

But she can’t. She won’t.

She won’t let her negligence break one more thing.
Skye:

Simmons keeps her on a small but steady does of painkillers throughout the rest of the day, so as long as Skye doesn’t move too much, she’s not really feeling the pain of the seventy-plus fractures in her bones. She feels enough of a jolt cut through the narcotic haze whenever she bumps something too hard, but she can use her hands for small things, which is something.

Coulson dismisses Dr. Garner over conference call as he updates everyone about the state of things in Wisconsin. He thanks him for his help, and Skye can tell by the way he calls him ‘Andrew’ that the two men have probably known each other for as long as Andrew’s known May. When his ride is ready, May walks Andrew out of the plane, but after that, she disappears for a little while, and Skye tries not to resent that.

*She’s had almost as rough a day as you’ve had. Let her have her space.*

When she does eventually come back to the Cage, May has a manila envelope in her hands.

“Andrew’s assessment,” she says quietly, holding it out to her.

Skye takes the envelope and starts to pick at the brad that’s holding it closed, but her clumsy fingers can’t quite manage the task.

“Can you open it?” she asks after a moment, holding it out to May.

May extracts the short stack of papers and holds them out to Skye, but even after she takes them and starts reading them, May remains standing formally.

*She’s afraid to touch you…*

“Come sit,” Skye asks, pleading with her eyes, and her S.O. finally moves, somewhat stiffly, to join her on the bed. She sits down against the wall with space still between them, so Skye leans over until her shoulder bumps against May’s. She can feel the dull ache from the pressure, but she doesn’t move away.

“You can read it, too,” Skye offers, tucking her legs up onto the bed and resting the papers on her thighs.

Dr. Garner’s handwriting is neat and clear, and the form seems to be pretty standard for an intake assessment.

“I think he figured you and me out pretty fast,” she says, pointing at a place on the first page where it lists *Relationship status.* “I mean, I said I was in a long-term relationship. I said it was with a ‘she’. And then here—“ She points to the place where it says *On a scale of 1-10, how would you rate your relationship?*, “He asked me to explain my answer. And I think it may have been something I said about wishing she wasn’t always so secretive, or wishing she was just a little more forthcoming with what she was feeling…it must have sounded a little familiar.”

She glances up at May, hoping for a smile, but May is still staring solemnly at the paper. Skye turns more fully to face her, reaching out and clumsily slipping her hand into May’s. Her hand is stiff, and it seems like May is holding her like she’s made of glass.

“Tell me how you met,” she requests, and May closes her eyes rather than looking at her.
“You don’t want to talk about this,” she says, shaking her head.

“You don’t want to talk about this,” Skye cuts back. “I didn’t want to talk to a shrink.”

May purses her lips but still doesn’t look at Skye, sighing before she answers. “He worked with SHIELD, doing consultations for them. On gifted people sometimes, but mostly on agents—Specialists had to do them once a year back then. One year, I did my annual eval with him, and it was the first time I wanted to keep talking when my session was over.”

“Just like that?” Skye asks, and incredulous smile creeping across her face.

May shrugs. “I told you. Sometimes love comes in like a car through the living room. Uninvited and unexpected.”

Skye stares at her a moment longer before facing forwards again and leaning over to rest her head on May’s shoulder. “Did you tell him about the time travel before you got married?”

May nods once against the top of her head. “I did. And he still proposed the next day.”

Skye bites her lip, looking down at the form on her lap again, at the space where Marital status is checked Never married. Below it, questions fill the sheet, some of her answers crowding out all the white space, some conspicuously blank.

Describe your relationship with:

Parents:

Siblings:

Extended Family Members:

Husband/Wife/Significant Other:

Education history:

Have you experienced physical, sexual, or emotional abuse?

Do you have a history of abusing alcohol?

Have you ever attempted to take your own life?

What significant life changes or stressful events have you experienced recently?

When she finishes reading it all and flips it closed again, she’s not sure if May read everything too—she’s been sitting so stiffly beside her. But when she glances over again, she sees May only staring down at their joined hands, at the camouflage pattern of purple and black across Skye’s skin…

“May—“

“I am so, so sorry,” May says suddenly, her voice sounding like it’s barely making it out of her throat. “I thought I could help you through this. I thought—“

“You didn’t know, May,” Skye says reassuringly, shaking her head. “Neither of us did. It’s not your fault.”

“I just keep hurting you…“
Skye turns sharply to face her, but May keeps her head down. “You’ve never hurt me,” Skye

“I’ve done nothing but hurt you for your entire life.”

“No.”

Skye pulls her hand out of May’s, ignoring the pain as she brings both hands up to May’s shoulders, turning her head until the woman is looking at her. May attempts to fight her, pulling in the opposite direction, and once they’re facing each other, Skye realizes why.

She’s crying.

It’s so startling that Skye can’t even react for a moment, staring at the tears slipping down May’s cheeks and the way her jaw is clamped tight, fighting against a sob. Not once in the time since they got together, not once even since she met May in her present time, has she seen May fall apart like this. The last time she saw her cry at all was when…

*When she visited you in a library bathroom in Carolina.*

*For her, it was the day Quinn shot you.*

*Oh, May…*

Skye pulls May into her arms and the woman comes willingly, settling against her with her forehead on Skye’s shoulder and one arm coming to wrap around her waist. Skye feels a dull stab of pain but decides not to tell May that she’s leaning directly on the bruise that the ICER round left the day before yesterday, just attempts to smooth a comforting hand over May’s back.

“It’s okay,” she whispers, just like she did the last time. “It’s okay.”

She can tell that May is fighting hard against the emotion even as she’s unraveling, so Skye gives her all the time she needs as she pulls herself back together. Even though she’s not being loud, Skye can hear the anguish, and she wonders how May doesn’t have bruises breaking out over her own arms.

“I’m sorry, Skye,” May gasps again after a moment, finally looking up at her. Her face is a mess, and Skye feels her own heart breaking further. “There’s nothing I touch that I don’t ruin. I messed up your whole childhood—

“No, May,” Skye cuts her off, reaching up to clumsily brush May’s tears away. “You’ve got that backwards. You were the only good thing about my childhood. You don’t get to decide that you’re the worst thing that’s happened to me. My father will get that title every time. But you—May…”

She pulls her hand away only to point down to a line on the first page of the assessment—*Describe your relationship with your significant other*—where Andrew wrote down her answer verbatim.

“She keeps saving me.”

“You’re the reason I’m still here, May,” Skye says, looking up at May again and brushing her thumb over her cheek. “Whatever chaos you’ve brought into my life, you’ve done nothing but save me since the day I met you. And that has to count for something.”

She leans in and kisses May once, then again because thankfully, kissing her hurts less than holding her. She can feel the hesitancy still lingering on the other side of it, but she keeps leaning forward fearlessly, just like May did for her in the past days.
Give it time. Just don’t give up.

When she pulls away, Skye sits back against the wall and rests her head on May’s shoulder again and sighs.

“What’s going to happen now?” she finally asks, the question she’s been putting off since this morning.

May reaches over and flips to the last page of the assessment, the one with a single heading at the top and a signature at the bottom.

Doctor’s Recommendation:

It didn’t have many comments on the history she shared through that session. The language is clinical, but Skye guesses that’s kind of the point of calling in a third party…

“Immediate removal from active duty, mandatory leave minimum of six months,” she summarizes, glancing at May. “Did Coulson already read this?”

May nods, still sniffling a little. “Yeah. Before he gave me your copy.”

“He doesn’t want me anywhere near something as intense as yesterday, does he?” Skye says, sighing and sinking back into the wall.

“No, and I don’t either,” May says quietly. Then, finally, she turns towards Skye, leaning over her and gazing at her seriously. “But I’m afraid that might be coming sooner rather than later.”

Confused, Skye starts to sit up, but May presses her back gently, crowding over her and speaking in a whisper.

“I can’t tell you much,” she says, her voice barely more than a breath as she glances at the once-again-live cameras in the corners. “But Bobbi and Mack are definitely up to something, and we’re sure that Hunter disappearing in the past week has something to do with that. Whatever they’re planning, whatever they’re doing, Coulson’s not willing to ignore it much longer. Once they both get back, he says, we’re cracking down on them. And I would like to think that we will get everything smoothed out peacefully, but you know with our group that is never the case.”

Skye closes her eyes, absorbing this.

Just when you thought the team was finally coming together...

“I’m so tired of this, May,” she sighs. “How many different ways can someone be betrayed?”

When she opens her eyes, May is still close, gazing at her sadly, and Skye knows they’re all thinking of the same people who wrecked their lives in the past year.

“The point is,” May eventually says in a whisper, “whatever is about to happen, neither of us want you to be caught in the crossfire.”

Suddenly understanding, Skye sits up, making May move back a little.

“Where…”

“A safe place,” May says quickly. “Somewhere isolated and protected, but it’s quiet and comfortable. Just until this is over.”
An image of a cabin with a fireplace drifts through her mind, and Skye looks down, biting her lip.

“It’s where we spent my birthday, isn’t it?”

“It’s the safest place I know,” May says, laying a cautious hand on Skye’s cheek. “I’m sorry. I know it’s Christmas.”

“Maybe I can cut a tree down and haul it in,” Skye shrugs, attempting a smile, trying to make this easier for May. “I haven’t had a Christmas tree in years.”

May smiles sadly, and Skye does her best to hold her own in place, knowing this has to be hurting May almost as much as it hurts her. She looks away under the pretense of reaching for her phone, opening the password-protected photo cache and scrolling back through a year of memories.

“You know, this time last year, we were in London,” she says, finally reaching the folder of photos from last December. Though all the pictures are stored on her computer now, she’s kept a few of her favorites on her phone. One of her selfies in front of Parliament. One of May, hands stuffed in her coat pockets, looking out over the river towards the Tower bridge. Another one of May, just a blur of black in the center of an ice rink, the soaring London Eye filling the sky behind her. The only photo she’d asked May to smile for during those brief days, a selfie with her in front of the Buckingham gates.

May leans her head gently against Skye’s as she looks at the pictures with her. “That was a good week,” she whispers, sounding sad.

“You sure we can’t take off and go there instead of the cabin?”

May doesn’t answer, and Skye feels her swallow.

“I’m sorry Skye,” she whispers again, sounding broken. “I promised you that I wouldn’t leave you. I promised you wouldn’t have to leave us…”

“It’s okay, May,” Skye whispers back, unable to face her. “Sometimes you don’t know what a promise means when you’re making it. I know this isn’t forever. I know you’re just trying to keep me safe, just like you always have.”

They sit in silence for a few moments, and Skye flips through more pictures on her phone, moving back in time through 2013…

**Before you were even an agent…**

Some photos of the Tuscan countryside that she took from the train (*Hours from almost dying and you had no idea…*). A picture of the five of them (*Ugh, I really need to photoshop Ward out…*) crowded around the booth in the Bus, an Italian Thanksgiving feast spread out in front of them. An awkward group selfie at the Grand Canyon with Fitz and Jemma. A few other photos from their road trip through the desert. Some pictures in Cambridge when they were there doing cleanup. A few screenshots of some old agents’ files she’d been looking at, back when she was searching for the agent who dropped her off at the orphanage, hoping she was about to find her mother...

*I never came back to delete those*, Skye thinks, glancing at Andrew’s assessment, still sitting on the bed beside her.

Describe your relationship with your parents, one of the first questions reads.

Taking a deep breath, Skye picks up the file and sets it on her leg where May can see it too. She
points at the line on the front page where, up until a couple of weeks ago, she wouldn’t have known what to write—*Race*—and the answer she gave Dr. Garner:

*Chinese-American with a side of something inhuman*

“I want to tell you the things my father told me when I met him in San Juan, May,” she says quietly.

Beside her, May sounds a little startled. “You don’t have to talk about—“

“No,” Skye says quickly, slipping her hand into May’s again and squeezing gently, ignoring the pain. “I know I’ve been putting this off, and there’s no reason you shouldn’t hear everything, so listen.”

She takes a deep breath.

“First of all, my name…the name my parents gave me…was Daisy.”

**December 24, 2014**

The goodbye at the cabin is awful. Sleeping alone is worse.

**December 25, 2014.**

It's not Santa who visits that day—it's the elusive teleporter. But he does bring good tidings.

Than comes an ominous phone call from May telling her to run.

Armed SHIELD agents land within minutes.

Skye sees the gun pointed at her and thinks only of how she was wrong—she *really* doesn't want to be shot again...

Trees explode. Bobbi and the other agent go flying. Skye lowers her throbbing hands and stares at the reeling fir trees and calls for the only person that she thinks might hear her.

In a burst of light, Gordon appears beside her.

"Would you like go home?"

She doesn't remember nodding, but a second later, the world turns over. She holds onto his coat and wonders if this is how May's time travel feels.

*May...*

Chapter End Notes

I have absolutely no idea how this chapter got this long, but it's partly the reason we ended up with this super-summary at the end. I struggled to get these chapters mapped out before I posted this one, and I really didn't want to spend any time on the "Real
SHIELD" storyline (the whole arc still makes me roll my eyes). The scenes at the Retreat seemed a little important but felt awkward at both the end of this chapter and the beginning of the next one, so I decided to just reference the events here rather than stretching it out into its own chapter. I'll reference some parts of Gordon's conversation with Skye in a little more detail later, but we will see a little bit of a time jump. Big things ahead, everyone! Stay tuned.
This chapter fought me hard, but here it is. Should only be two more chapters to finish out season 2. Brace yourselves, chickadees, the storm is coming. :(

December 28, 2014--Skye is 25, May is 45

The sleep feels long, but it feels good.

Everything seems relaxed and perfect, warm above and beneath like sand and sunshine. The sounds around her are repetitive and soothing, gentle waves steadily washing in and out. She’s so content that it takes her a long time to ask any questions at all.

Questions like, Where am I?

Skye opens her eyes slowly and blinks into the brightness, then shields her eyes with one hand and sits up. Ocean stretches infinitely ahead of her, the surf lapping only a few feet away from her feet. She looks down at herself and sees she’s wearing a sarong of soft cotton, white patterned with blooming red tropical flowers. The beach around her is completely deserted, but out in the water ahead of her, a woman stands waist-deep in the waves facing the horizon, arms stretched out oblique at her sides, fingertips trailing through the water.

Skye gets to her feet and takes a few steps over the saturated sand into the water, which is warm as it washes around her ankles. A few more feet and it’s up to her knees, and now she’s close enough to be sure of who is standing in front of her.

“May,” she calls, and the woman turns.

It is May, but she looks a little bit older, a few years of worry etched finely around her eyes, a few strands of silver glinting in her hair. May smiles when she sees her, reaching towards her with one hand as Skye gets closer. Now waist-deep in the water too, Skye wades close enough to wrap her arms around May’s torso in a relieved embrace, but her body is so hot to the touch that Skye pulls away, startled. Blisters bloom suddenly over May’s skin where Skye touched her, but she doesn’t react to the pain, just turns back towards the horizon.

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it?” May breathes, staring out at the distant seam of sea and sky, and Skye looks too. Everything is beautiful and bright, a sphere of gorgeous shades of blue hemming them in together. But as even Skye stares out at the edge of their world, she can see that something is wrong, that the horizon is higher than it should be, and getting higher…

“May…”

“I know,” May whispers, turning back towards the shore and grabbing Skye’s hand again, tugging her back towards dry land. There is a hiss as their hands touch, and Skye sees May’s skin blistering inside her grip.

“May—”
Other hands suddenly seize her, and Skye looks around, startled to see another version of May grabbing her with two hands, both pulling and pushing her through the water back towards land.

“Hurry!” the other May urges, casting a terrified look over her shoulder, and Skye looks too and sees the unmistakable swell of a great wave bearing down on them…

Their feet break out of the water onto the shore again, and Skye churns her legs to sprint away from the ocean across the great stretch of sand when she suddenly realizes one of her hands is empty…

She spins, seeing the first May still standing at the edge of the surf, the great wave climbing high above her, blocking out the blue of the sky…

“May!” Skye screams, horrified, trying to break away from the other woman to run back and grab her, but the other woman just hangs on tighter.

“There’s no time!” she shouts, dragging Skye away, and Skye digs her heels into the unhelpful sand, reaching back and screaming.

“May!!!”

The first woman just turns away from the wave, raising one hand like a goodbye. She looks completely unafraid.

“Go!” she shouts. “Run!”

“May!!!”

The wave crashes over them all, and Skye wakes up with a start.

The room around her is dim, the lights on the ceiling above her the wavering gold light of tiny candle flames. She tries to sit up and look around, but though she can turn her head, she discovers that she can’t move anything below her shoulders. Bewildered, Skye lifts her head to look down at herself and sees that her clothes are gone, that she’s barely covered with some strategically-placed cloth… and that her body is stuck full of long pins.

Terror fills her immediately, and she starts breathing faster.

What is happening?

Where am I?

What are you doing to me?

But, as if hearing her silent cry, the messenger suddenly steps into view.

“Hey.” She hears Gordon’s voice at her shoulder and swivels her head, catching sight of the eyeless figure. “Everything’s going to be okay. You’re safe now.”

“Gordon,” she gasps, wanting to seize him by his sleeve but unable even lift a finger. “Where am I?”

“This is the place I told you about,” he says soothingly, stepping closer and putting his hand over hers. She can’t feel it. “You called for me—do you remember?”

Memories of her last waking moments crash through her mind then.
May telling you to run...a team of agents you don’t know...Bobbi screaming at you, warning you about the shot...nearly killing two agents...

What happened to everyone else?

What happened to May?

“How long have I been here?” Skye breathes, lifting her head as much as possible, attempting to get a good look at the room. She sees a table full of medical instruments, a computer monitor, but none of this looks like a hospital...

“Two days.”

Her gaze snaps back to—well, Gordon’s face.

“Two days?” she repeats, horrified, and he nods.

“I need to go,” Skye gasps, focusing all her energy on moving her limbs, which are still refusing to cooperate. “They need me—something bad has happened. Why can’t I move?” she demands, looking at Gordon. “What are you doing to me?”

Over her shoulder, she hears a door open.

“You’re healing,” a second male voice says, and she twists her neck to see another man entering, setting a tray of instruments on one of the nearby tables. This one looks a lot younger than Gordon—closer to her own age—with sandy brown hair and bright eyes. He moves over to look at the computer screen but keeps talking. “Leaving now wouldn’t be...you ever made microwave popcorn?”

“Who are you?” Skye demands, not bothering to be polite. “Also, where are my clothes, and what are you doing to me with these needles?”

The young man finally faces her, looking a little surprised and apologetic. “Sorry I thought—I’m Lincoln, your transitioner. I thought Gordon filled you in?”

When Gordon shakes his head, the younger man pulls up a chair beside her...bed? and sits down at her shoulder.

“Sorry, let me try to explain,” he says, leaning close and looking serious. “Imagine thousands of years of evolution taking place instantaneously. That’s what happened to you after the mist. These treatments—” He gestures to the needles, which Skye suddenly notices are intermittently shimmering with faint red light, “are helping your body adjust to the change, transitioning you quickly and painlessly, I hope. We usually like to start the process right after the mist, but—”

“How long?” Skye interrupts. “How long? When can I go?”

The guy—Lincoln—looks a little perplexed. “You got places to go? People to see?”

“I’m worried about...my friends,” she says, deciding to leave out who exactly. “I think they’re in danger.”

Lincoln glances up at Gordon, brow furrowing as he returns his gaze to her. “You’re the one that’s in danger Skye, remember? You’re being hunted.”

“I wasn’t...” she starts to explain, but falls silent when she realizes she doesn’t actually know what’s
Bobbi seemed like she was trying to warn me…but she brought the agents. Why did they come at all?

What is happening back at the Playground?

Where’s May? Why hasn’t she come for me?

Seeming to sense her agitation, Lincoln puts a calming hand over hers. Again, she sees him do it, but she can’t feel it.

“I can put you back under, if you’d prefer,” he offers, looking concerned.

Skye bites her lip, looking down at the needles in her body. She’s still all kinds of not okay with this, but she’s currently completely powerless to fight back, so she chooses to back down from this battle.

“How much longer will I be a pincushion?” she asks, looking up at him.

He goes back to the computer, checking the screen. “It looks like we could be finished by this afternoon.”

What afternoon?

“I don’t even know what day it is,” she sighs, closing her eyes.

“December 28,” Gordon answers from her other side. “It’s about 8 in the morning now.”

Morning. Third day since Christmas.

What has happened since then...

“Put me under again,” she says certainly, opening her eyes and looking over at Lincoln.

She doesn’t want to be unconscious, but she also doesn’t want to be stressing over all her unanswered questions the entire time.

The younger man nods and picks up a tray, carrying it to her bedside. She sees him slip on a pair of gloves before picking up a long, thin needle, bringing it somewhere near her shoulder.

She feels a brief prick of the needle going into her skin, and then she feels nothing at all.

She wakes up sometime later to him taking out the needles.

She hears the soft splash-and-clatter as they land on something metal and liquid one by one, and as soon as she opens her eyes, Lincoln leans over her, looking at her seriously.

“Don’t try to move yet,” he warns, “but tell me—do you feel any pain anywhere?”

She takes a breath, reaching for an awareness of anything south of her neck.

“No.”

“Okay, good,” he says, shifting back down towards her right ankle. “So, I’m going to be removing these in a very specific order.” He carefully pulls a needle from her calf and drops it into the tray. “But this isn’t a birthday cake, ok?” he says, glancing up at her with a note of caution in his tone.
“Don’t go grabbing at them once you can move your hands again. You could end up with a damaged nerve or some unexpected reactions. Like muscle spasms. Or puking.”

“Copy that,” she says, feeling a tingling in her foot. She flexes her toes experimentally. They move, so at least that’s a start.

“Are you actually an acupuncturist?” she asks, watching him move around her and carefully pull the needles from her limbs and abdomen. He seems relaxed, as if he’s done this before.

“It’s not my day job,” he says with a friendly smile, glancing up at her as he drops another pin in the tray. “I’m a medical student, though. A woman here taught me how to do this.”

“And where’s here? What do you do here?” She glances around at the nondescript room again.

“Right now? I just help you.”

The extraction takes several minutes, and once enough of the pins are removed, Lincoln shakes out a sheet and drapes it over her body, avoiding the three remaining pins sticking out of her leg, arm, and shoulder.

“Now, once these three are out,” he says, pausing to look up at her, “you’re going to start feeling a lot of things you weren’t feeling before. I want you to stay lying down for a couple of minutes and just move your limbs slowly. Flex your hands, bend your knees, roll your feet a little, but don’t try to sit or stand up.”

Once the last pins land in the tray beside him, he stands by her hip and leans over her.

“Take a few deep breaths, shift a little,” he asks, eyes darting between her face and the monitor behind her. “Tell me if you feel nauseous and I’ll grab a bucket.”

Skye closes her eyes and breathes. She does feel a little lightheaded for a moment, and once she starts moving her arms and legs a little, she feels worse.

She hears him continuing to coach her, his voice moving around the room, and when she opens her eyes again, he’s setting a neatly-folded stack of her clothes on the bed beside her.

“I’m going to help you sit up now,” he says, slipping one hand into hers and sliding his other hand beneath her bare shoulder, which reminds Skye to hug the sheet to herself as she slowly sits upright. The vertigo passes quickly, and when she finally opens her eyes, he’s smiling down at her. He’s taller than she realized.

“How do you feel?” he asks, pulling his hand from hers to brush her hair out of her eyes.

The waves in her body are slowly settling, and the room is no longer tilting.

“All right,” she answers, reaching for her shirt. “Can I do this part by myself, though?”

“Let me make sure you can stand unassisted before I leave you alone,” he says, nudging her knee so that she swings her legs off the bed. He pulls the sheet around her back like a toga, holding both of her shoulders as she plants her feet on a carpeted floor and stands slowly. Her legs feel sluggish, but she guesses that’s to be expected after apparently not moving for two days.

“We flushed your lymphatic and circulatory systems,” Lincoln explains as he holds her arms while she takes a few shaky steps around the room, “so you may feel a little weak for a couple of days. But you shouldn’t be feeling any pain right now, so if something hurts, you need to tell me.”
“No,” she says, looking down at her arms and realizing for the first time that the bruising that was coloring her skin on Christmas Day is gone without a trace. “Nothing hurts.”

Once he’s satisfied that she can stand and walk around the room without falling, Lincoln leaves through the door he came through before, and Skye slowly pulls on her clothes. Her phone is not in the stack of her effects, and this makes her nervous. As she pulls her jeans up to her hips, she examines the objects on the table, inspecting them to see if anything could be a weapon. No scalpels, but she carefully pockets one of the acupuncture needles.

*Just in case.*

“How are you feeling now?” Lincoln asks again once she’s called him back in.

“Kind of normal,” she answers. She can still feel the buzzing of the powers she’s only had for a couple of weeks, but that seems to be her new normal.

“I need to get a message to my friends,” Skye says quickly before he can ask anything else. “Do you have my phone?”

Lincoln shakes his head. “Gordon probably has it. He’s the only one who can make contact with the outside world. You can talk to him when he gets back.”

Something about this fact feels extremely unsettling.

*That doesn’t sound like a prison at all.*

“How exactly are we?” Skye finally asks, looking around the room.

Lincoln shrugs, but he’s smiling a little. “No one really knows. The official name is Chinese, I think — *Laishi*?” He’s moving towards a set of double doors on the other side of the room, and Skye follows.

“It doesn’t exactly translate,” Lincoln continues, pushing open the doors. Sunlight floods in, stealing Skye’s vision for a moment. When her eyes adjust, she can barely breathe.

“We just call it Afterlife.”

May:

Based on the number of meals that have been brought to her (and subsequently taken away, barely touched), May’s guessing that she’s been in this cell for at least two days now. Agent Weaver had not seemed terribly surprised to see her shamelessly surrendering after icing four of the renegade agents (including Gonzales) and then all but throwing Coulson out of the base via his secret escape chute.

“They know about Skye, Phil,” she’d muttered as she reached for the drop-switch. “Find her!”

Now, if it really has been two days since Christmas, she can only imagine that he’s a safe distance from here. Hopefully, with Skye.

But no one has been telling her *anything.*

Weaver had come down once after the guards had locked May in Ward’s old cell (the cell where
Skye had shot herself…), but it had only been for a round of fruitless questioning. May had sat stoically on the concrete floor and said nothing, no matter how Weaver phrased the question. After that, it had mostly been only agents with faces she didn’t recognize bringing her food and water. No sign of Fitz or Simmons, no sign of Trip, Mack, or Bobbi.

No word about Skye.

May has no idea what is going on upstairs, so she keeps her confusion on a tight leash and with her surplus of time, focuses on binding everything up with tai chi and shelving it for later. She doesn’t believe in God, but she occasionally sends up silent requests to whatever power is listening.

Please keep them safe, since I can’t.

Gonzales is the first visitor arrive with a stack of files and take a seat in front of her, as if resigned to the fact that this talk will take a while. She smirks selfishly at the memory of him crumpling after her ICER shot—it was the least he deserved for this mess.

Gonzales takes his time flipping through the files, and she stands with her arms folded boredly, leaning against the padded wall and waiting for him to get on with it.

“Is it true,” the old man finally begins, “that Fury asked you to spy on Coulson because of these GH-325 transfusions?”

May doesn’t respond, staring away as those memories drift up to the surface.

Last year. End of summer. That already feels like a lifetime ago…

“Is it also true that Coulson himself asked you to put a bullet in his head because of it?”

May knows when she’s on a stand. She’s happy to keep him waiting all day (night?). She’s got nowhere to be.

“That’s a man that you helped escape. A man that Fury didn’t trust. A man that you yourself didn’t trust. A man that didn’t even trust himself.”

May nearly rolls her eyes—there is no part of this that is new information to her. The fact that he thinks she didn’t agonize over all these facts back when Coulson was carving up walls is the part that’s insulting.

“There’s loyalty and there’s stubbornness,” Gonzales says, picking up his cane and climbing to his feet. He wasn’t using a cane the last time she saw him, years ago in the Triskellion—she wonders how he got the injury that makes him need it now.

Three uneven steps bring him within inches of the barrier.

“Tell me Agent May,” the old man asks, “are you loyal to Coulson or to SHIELD?”

Unwilling to get herself accused of treason, May casts a tired look through the barrier.

“They’re the same,” she answers simply.

You’re all wasting your time here.

Gonzales doesn’t seem surprised by her answer, but he takes another small step closer, making the grid shimmer a little.
“Coulson’s powered pet—and your special someone, according to Mack and Bobbi—“

May feels her heartbeat speed up involuntarily. Where is she?

“tried to kill seven of our agents,” Gonzales finishes. “And you’re telling me they’re the same?”

May feels her body stiffen, unable to process this information.

What agents?

When?

What did Skye do?

But that’s not the thing Gonzales is really getting at, so May doesn’t direct her answer towards his implications about Skye.

“Coulson had nothing to do with Skye’s powers,” she says certainly. “They were caused by a weapon in Hydra’s possession!”

“That you were chasing because of some voices in his head,” Gonzales reminds her.

May has had too long of a year to have any patience with this.

“We were pursuing Hydra because that’s our job,” she snaps, one hand tightening into a fist at her side. “It’s what we should all be doing right now instead of wasting our time on some witch hunt!” she snarls, rounding on the camera where she has no doubt at least one other agent must be watching. She hopes it’s Bobbi—her shoulder still aches from where the younger agent wrenched it during their fight over the Toolbox.

“Agent May,” Gonzales returns tiredly, “you of all people should know what happens when powered people lose control.”

On the other side of the barrier, he holds up an old mission file for her to see.

Bahrain.

Confidential.

Where the hell has that been? It should be buried under the rubble of the Triskellion right now…

“You had to put one down,” he reminds her unnecessarily. “Isn’t that why they call you the Cavalry?”

May presses down on the images of Eva, Katya, and the dead-eyed men doing the girl’s bidding…

“So you want to put down Coulson and Skye?” she growls, glaring through the barrier.

“I want to avoid it,” Gonzales replies calmly. “His actions are leading to a deadly showdown. Help me find him, and we’ll stop it.”

May folds her arms, attempting an assured expression.

“Don’t worry. When he’s ready, he’ll find you.”

He leaves her alone for a long time after that.
She passes the time by pacing, exercising, doing tai chi, occasionally sleeping, and overthinking everything. She can’t time travel—she’s considered it, but it’s not worth it. The only thing worse than literally exposing herself on camera would be exposing her secret too—she doesn’t need to give the people upstairs one more reason to mistrust her.

That night, it’s Bobbi who comes down the stairs with her food.

May is off the cot in seconds, crowding as close to the barrier she dares.

“What happened to Skye?” she demands, putting all the authority she can into her voice. There are plenty of things she wants to say to Bobbi, but if she only gets one chance, she starts with the most important one.

Bobbi looks upset as she reaches the lower level and approaches the barrier. “I don’t know, May,” she says in a pained voice.

“Drop the act, Bobbi,” May snaps, glaring at the younger agent. “I know you went there with the team. What the hell happened? Where is she?”

“I don’t know, May,” Bobbi repeats, setting the tray of food on the floor between them. “She disappeared with the teleporter that took Raina and her father.”

Startled, May falls silent, having no response prepared for that information. Bobbi keeps talking though, her voice stretched thin with anxiety.

“We didn’t go there to hurt her—I would never hurt her, May. I told the others to use ICER’s only, but Calderon didn’t listen to me—”

“Gonzales said she tried to kill people, Morse—now for the last time, what the hell happened?”

Bobbi closes her eyes, resting her hands on her hips, and takes a deep breath.

“Calderon fired his gun at her,” she says, looking up at May, “and Skye put her hands up like she was trying to catch the bullet. The next second, it was like a bomb had gone off. Some of the trees exploded, there was a shock wave, all of us went flying backward…and as I sat up I saw the teleporter appear and take her away.”

May stands stock-still for a moment, absorbing all this.

She’s gone.

They tried to attack her, and she’s gone.

To god-knows-where…

“We’re looking for her, of course, May,” Bobbi says, reaching for the tablet on the stand and opening a tiny square at the base of the barrier to slide the tray of food through. “But you know how much progress we were making on tracking that man before…”

Yeah. None whatsoever.

May glances down at the food disdainfully as Bobbi seals the barrier again.

“Let me out of here, Morse. Let me go look for her.”

Bobbi gives her a pained look. “You know I can’t do that.”
“I don’t know anything,” May snaps, kicking the tray of food into the barrier, where it instantly sizzles into crusty carbon that crumbles onto the concrete floor and fills the air with an acrid stench. “Except that we trusted you, and you betrayed us. You just can’t stop being a double agent, can you, Morse? So why not switch sides again and let me out of here?”

Bobbi looks hurt. “It’s not about sides, May. We’re all SHIELD here.”

“Looks pretty oppositional to me,” May snaps, gesturing to the laser barrier separating them.

“We don’t want to hurt anyone. We’re trying to—“

“Morse,” May snarls, seconds from losing control completely. “Get the hell out.”

Bobbi gives her a long look, glances down at the ruined food on the floor, then takes a slow step back towards the stairs.

“I’ll get you another tray.”

“Don’t bother.” May all but stomps to the corner of the room, tucking herself into the blackness and breathing very slowly.

“If it matters,” she hears Bobbi say from the stairs, “I didn’t tell anyone any of the other things you told me about yourself.”

May had figured as much, since Gonzales hadn’t brought it up.

“Are you waiting for me to say thank you?” she snaps, not turning around.

The next thing she hears is the door at the top of the stairs closing.

December 30, 2014

Skye:

Her first day had passed at Afterlife without much excitement. In the fading daylight hours, Lincoln had given her a vague tour of the small community, and Skye collected the facts like pebbles as they came…

No one but the leaders live here permanently. Some people come here when they need a safe place to stay.

Everyone here carries the same gene that you have and is brought here to be evaluated, cultured, and trained before they go through the change, but that only happens to one person every few years.

You jumped the line, but there is no one here who will harm you.

The changes from the mist are irreversible…

Even at the end of the day though, Skye had still felt several pebbles short of a mosaic as she curled up into another foreign bed in another new place. Her hand itched for her phone, her laptop —something besides her clothes that felt familiar. Lincoln had told her she could ask Gordon for her phone when they saw him again, but the teleporter had been conspicuously absent for the rest of the day. Without the distraction of activity, her mind had spun full-force as she lay in bed and ran through everything in her training about what to do when she found herself in an unknown (if not
hostile) place, all the while cataloguing every single question she still had about this place and what was happening in the place she’d left…

She didn’t sleep much that night.

Lincoln had met her at the next morning to lead her to breakfast, a quiet community affair where Skye had been hyper-aware of everyone staring at her like she was the new kid in school. After a walk out to the open mountains, Lincoln had demonstrated his own special skill—channeling electricity at will.

“Our gifts don’t have to be terrifying,” he said as he pushed static through her body and out her feet until she was hovering a few inches off the ground. “They’re a part of us. I felt lost before I came here too, looking for answers in all the wrong places. But we’re connected to something older and bigger than you could ever imagine, something extraordinary. Don’t walk away from it.”

On their way back into the little village, she’d spotted Gordon and rushed up to him without thinking twice. He had been frustratingly unhelpful, declining to give her her phone back, answering her request that he pass a message to SHIELD noncommittally (“I can ask permission, but they’ll advise against it”), and outright refusing to tell her where Raina and her father were (it’s not like he can pretend he didn’t deliver them to wherever they are…).

“Ask permission from who?” Skye had demanded from Lincoln after Gordon moved away again.

“The elders,” Lincoln had answered without elaborating. “You’ve made a lot of people afraid that our secret won’t be safe for much longer.”

Later that day, when she discovered that Raina was in fact in the cabin on the other side of the community, she’d made people afraid for other reasons.

Lincoln seemed confused when the cabin around them began shaking, which is probably how she beat him to Raina’s little dwelling, tucked behind some trees on the edge of the village. The mystic had been her usual frustrating self, talking in circles that made Skye feel like a spell was being woven, all the while lurking in the shadows with the hood of her cloak pulled over her head.

“I didn’t make anything happen,” the woman sneered from the darkness obscuring her face. “You wanted to go in there, Skye. Because we’re the same before, and we’re the same now. I am on the outside what you are on the inside!” Thistled hands suddenly pushed back the hood to reveal the woman’s face, two gold eyes in a thornbush.

“No!” Skye had shouted for more than one reason, horror and fury merging into a white-hot burst inside her chest. Raina had stiffened, her frame seeming to go blurry, and Skye realized with even more horror that she was the one causing it.

“So that’s what you are,” Raina whispered, collapsing to her knees.

“Skye, you need to stop!” she heard Lincoln saying behind her, clearly afraid to get between them.

“No!” Raina interrupted, gasping for breath and clutching her chest. “Finish this! End my nightmares!”

“Enough!” a loud, authoritative voice suddenly cut through the chaos, and Skye had turned to see a tall Chinese woman standing in the doorway. With one look, everything had suddenly stopped shaking.

The woman had introduced herself as Jiaying, and she reminded Skye with a scowl that both she and
Raina were guests in her house.

“Whatever you two were in the past, that’s not what you are now,” the woman said sternly as she helped Raina off the floor and to a chair. “She’s one of us, just like you are.”

“I can’t stay,” Skye said, staring at the barely-recognizable woman beneath the thorns and feeling sick. “Not if she’s here.”

“We’ll leave that choice to you,” Jiaying responded calmly, straightening up and facing Skye. “But I have chosen to be your guide, should you remain with us.”

Skye had given no answer at the moment, had spent the rest of the day alone in her bungalow, thinking through her options. Lincoln had left her alone (You probably scared your one friend here off for good, Skye, nice job…), and the next morning, it had been the woman, Jiaying, who knocked on Skye’s door first.

“Have you thought about what you would like to do?” the woman had asked, her demeanor much gentler and friendlier than it had been the day before (Well, you aren’t torturing a woman in front of her this time, Skye…). Admittedly, Skye had thought a lot about it, but she hadn’t really decided what to say until the woman was standing right in front of her.

“I can’t stay here,” she had led off, facing the woman boldly and forcing herself to sound certain. “I have friends that may be in trouble, and I’m a SHIELD agent, so I won’t stay here any longer than I have to. But I don’t want to put anyone else at risk because I can’t control my own powers,” she had continued, gazing up at the woman and trying not to stare at the scars crisscrossing her face, “so what can you teach me?”

And that was how she found herself here, walking a narrow but well-worn trail with the woman, one that leads them out and away from the community as white morning light both softens and sharpens the world around them. The mountains that Skye had seen from a distance at Afterlife seem to slowly be growing larger, and before long, it feels like they’ve walked into a dreamscape of grass, stone, snow, and sky. It’s breathtaking.

Despite it being midwinter, the air is only pleasantly crisp and slowly getting warmer as the sun creeps higher in the sky, so Skye’s denim shirt is enough to keep her warm as they trudge up a hill and she breaks into a sweat. She’s tried to figure out where they could possibly be if it’s still so warm in the winter, and southern China or northern Myanmar seem likely possibilities.

Probably the last place anyone would go looking for you...

They walk for a long time before Jiaying speaks.

“Tell me about yourself.”

It’s a question Skye has always hated, no matter who it’s coming from, because the question might as well be, Tell me how you want me to think of you.

SHIELD agent?

Hacker?

High school dropout?

All-but orphan?
Rather than answering, she pushes the question back to the interrogator. “What do you want to know?”

“Where did you grow up?” the woman asks, glancing back at Skye as the path levels out and they can now walk beside each other.

Skye shrugs. “All over the place. I was in the foster system.”

Jiaying doesn’t ask why, just nods once.

“United States, I assume?”

Skye nods again, kicking a pebble along the path ahead of them. “Yeah. At least eighteen of them, anyway.”

"Why so many?"

"Apparently, my murderous father was chasing me around the world, so I was in some kind of witness-protection setup. I didn’t know that until recently though. I just thought no state wanted to deal with me for more than a year."

Jiaying doesn’t respond for a long minute, and Skye's not surprised when she changes the subject with her next question.

“And how did you become a SHIELD agent?”

Skye thinks back to the summer over a year ago, of the surprising discovery of a super-powered dad and her subsequent abduction for the intel on him that she leaked.

“I got on SHIELD’s radar when I hacked into their system and leaked some intel. They brought me in to consult on a case and let me stick around for a few months. Eventually, I decided I wanted to earn my place with them, so I started working for it, training to be a field agent. I got my badge just a few days before SHIELD fell.”

She deliberately doesn’t mention May, doesn’t let herself wonder what might have been different if May had not been on that plane she’d been brought onto with a bag over her head…

But Jiaying either senses the missing space or already understands Skye better than she realized.

“Did you make friends at SHIELD? Is that why you stuck with them even after the organization fell apart?”

Skye smiles to herself, thinking not only of May but of Jemma, Fitz, Coulson, Trip…

“Yeah. They’re like family.”

“They came after you, though,” Jiaying reminds her. It’s not said coldly, just a simple statement of truth, but Skye’s defenses immediately flare.

“But I don’t know why,” she says immediately, glancing at the woman from the corner of her eye as they reach a bend in the trail. “Someone in there that I trusted warned me and I got out in time. There must be some kind of faction that was coming after me.”

“Who warned you?” Jiaying asks, pausing on the trail but still not facing her. “Why do you trust her?”
And though she can’t quite say why, Skye knows this is a card she should not show just yet.

“She’s, uh, my best friend,” she answers awkwardly. “In that group, but also kind of ever. I trust her.”

“And you’re worried about her.” Jiaying finally glances over at Skye, gaze sympathetic.

Skye feels the need to look away. “I’m worried about all of them.”

“I see.”

They walk for a little while longer in silence until they eventually stop on a ridge overlooking a sprawling green valley. Skye can’t even see their little village in the distance anymore, so she faces the mountains across the expanse of grass instead. Sunlight glints off the snow on the highest peaks, and the wide, dark stone bases seem to be plunging their hands into the grasslands, holding on to the earth even as they stretch towards the sky. Above them, the sky has settled into cloudless winter blue, but a persistent cool breeze is blowing.

Skye takes a deep, refreshing breath and lets it out slowly.

“So what can you teach me?

“Do you understand your gift?” Jiaying asks, folding her arms behind her back and watching Skye with a curious gaze.

Skye thinks of the chaos she’s caused since Puerto Rico—shattered windows and broken bones. “I…make things shake.”

Jiaying laughs pleasantly, a surprisingly warm sound. “Well, not really. Everything is shaking already, vibrating at its own natural frequency. I believe you can learn to sense those frequencies around you and resonate them so that not everything is shaking—only what you choose.”

None of that makes much sense to Skye, but she’s willing to hear her out.

“So how do I do that?” she asks.

Jiaying laughs a little again. “I don’t know—I’m not the one with the gift. I just work here.”

The woman offers her a stone and challenges her to listen. Skye holds the rock in her hand and hears the mountain. Then she stretches out her hand and summons an avalanche.

“I moved a mountain,” Skye exhales disbelievingly as she watches the snow cascade down the mountain face.

She feels a small, encouraging grip on her elbow. “Remember that feeling,” Jiaying says with a proud smile. “It’s not something to be afraid of.”

Skye doesn’t know if she feels proud of herself yet, but for the first time since she got these powers, she feels the tiniest bit excited.

“Are you from here?” Skye asks as they walk back towards the village a little while later. “You seem to know this place really well.”

Jiaying gives a small smile. “I wasn’t born in this community, if that’s what you mean,” she says as the little Afterlife village comes into view on the horizon. “But I am from China.”
“You sound American,” Skye comments, listening harder for any kind of accent.

Jiaying only smiles wider, seeming a little smug. “Well, I’ve been speaking English for a long time.”

“What’s your gift?” Skye asks, slowly gaining confidence in talking to the woman.

This, however, is a question Jiaying conspicuously dodges.

“My gift is only seldom useful. Hopefully, you won’t have to see it.”

Back in the little village, Jiaying advises her to eat and rest before being called away by a man Skye doesn’t recognize. The woman turns back once before leaving.

“I’m very proud of your work today,” she says with a warm smile, a sight that makes Skye want to stand up just a little bit straighter even after the woman walks away.

Lincoln, surprisingly, appears then with a small carton of food he seems to have filched from the lunch spread earlier.

“You know it’s really impressive for Jiaying to take anyone under her wing,” he says as they walk back towards her cabin together.

“Yeah?” Skye says, quirking a brow at him.

“Yeah.”

“What’s her role here?”

Lincoln smiles a little as he answers. “Her role is… in charge. So really she must like you.”

He leaves her at the door of her cabin, and Skye finds it much easier to fall asleep this time, napping until Jiaying knocks a couple of hours later.

Instead of returning to the mountain, the woman this time leads Skye to another small building in the plaza, which seems to be more of a library or a study rather than a dwelling. She has an assortment of small objects on the table—a pebble, a twig, a sprig of rosemary, a small candle, a glass marble, a scrap of paper, a wire hairpin, a coin. They sit down on opposite sides of the collection, and for the first hour, Skye does little more than close her eyes and listen.

It’s not listening really, but since she’s using a sense she hadn’t had up until last week, it’s the closest word in Skye’s vocabulary for it. The buzzing beneath her skin that has always seemed like undecipherable white noise slowly becomes less muddled, sounds more patterned, like reading the words rather than just staring at letters on a page. One by one, she touches the items, reads their frequency, hears the way that item’s small song gets a little louder when she contacts it, and mentally files the wordless message. After a little practice, Jiaying has her close her eyes while she rearranges the items on the table and challenges Skye to tell her what order the objects are been laid out in without feeling with her fingers. Though it seems impossible when she describes it, Skye is shocked by how easy the task actually is.

“Let’s try something new now,” Jiaying says after that, clearing the small collection off the table and gathering the items onto her lap, out of Skye’s view.

She lifts her hands after a moment, one a closed fist, the other outstretched towards Skye.

“Take my hand,” the woman commands in a soft voice.
Skye hesitates for just a small moment before reaching out and slipping her fingers into Jiaying’s gentle grip, not unlike the way Lincoln had held her hand on the mountain the day before when he showed her his powers. Skye wonders at first if the woman is about to demonstrate her own abilities, but then Jiaying lifts her other hand a little.

“What object is in my hand now?”

“The candle,” Skye answers immediately, unsure how she knew.

Jiaying smiles as she uncurls her fingers to reveal the small tea light.

“Well done.”

Skye gets every single item right on the first try, and Jiaying smiles through the whole exercise, squeezing her hand once before she lets go to reach for the pile of items on her lap.

“Let’s see now if you can move something smaller than a mountain.”

Skye is less successful at this, causing the table to just rattle everything to the floor on the first try, but Jiaying is patient and encouraging.

“This time, try to focus less on the item itself but rather the space around it,” she says as they place the items back on the table. “Consider the atmosphere that’s pressing it from all sides. See if you can manipulate that rather than the object.”

Focusing on the air around them is like plucking another thread out of a blanket, a frequency that, though always present, had been mostly background noise to Skye up to that moment. Once she thinks she’s found it though, she focuses on amplifying it in the direction of the table.

This also ends in disaster—every single item goes flying off the table towards the other woman. They both yelp in surprise, but Jiaying laughs almost immediately as the items spill to the floor.

“It’s a start,” she says, smiling at Skye. “Let’s try again, but I’ll stand over there.”

Once Skye has managed to push every item individually off the table, Jiaying brings her a glass of water and tells her to rest for a moment.

“The ‘frequency’ thing makes everything make more sense,” Skye says during the pause, looking at her free hand, still free of pain and bruises. “If I was amplifying things, that explains the earthquakes. And I accidentally made a gun explode once…must have been the same thing. Then if I was turning that power inwards, of course it was damaging my bones.”

“There’s a learning curve to every gift,” Jiaying says with a smile. “Unfortunately, it’s usually trial and error in the beginning. But that’s why I’m here.”

Skye feels something warm and hopeful squeeze gently at her heart.

_Maybe a few days here wouldn’t be so bad._

After their break, Jiaying sets out a set of crystal glasses on the table, filling each with a different amount of water.

“You’ve got the hang of quality signatures now,” the woman says, setting the pitcher on the table. “Let’s see if you can close your eyes and identify quantity.”

Behind her closed eyes, Jiaying switches the order of the glasses, then moves Skye’s hand to hover
blindly over them.

“Where is the fullest glass?”

Somehow, Skye manages to choose right every time.

**May:**

She doesn’t want to be sitting here, but she guesses it’s better than in a cell.

She hadn’t been expecting a ship when they had taken the bag off her head yesterday and she found herself a conference room, but she had felt the subtle listing of the craft as she waited and realized immediately where she was.

*Must be the Iliad…Fury’s missing ship…*

Gonzales’s theatrics—sliding a gun across the table and daring her to pull the trigger—had felt a little insulting, but she had been more than a little surprised to see that he trusted her enough to give her a weapon.

And then, even more startling, he offered her a place on his group’s board.

“What’s the catch?” she’d growled, standing her ground.

“No catch. We’re going to bring Coulson in with or without your help, and when we do, he should have a strong advocate on the board.”

She had not wanted to agree. It felt like giving in. Agreeing to play by rules she would never agree with.

But she saw the truth even then—it was her best chance to protect her people. And not just Coulson—all of them.

Her fists could only get her so far.

Now, here she sits in Coulson’s office, the glass panel behind her still shattered from where Morse had leaped through it after stealing Fury’s Toolbox, a Toolbox that should be in Fitz’s pocket on its way to Coulson. He had left while she was on the ship, a move May could have predicted if anyone had bothered to ask, but thankfully, Mack and Bobbi didn’t know him well enough to think him capable of such deception.

All the higher-ups of Gonzales’s SHIELD have been shuttling back and forth between the ship and the base today, and May had ridden back to the Playground with Bobbi, who had tried once again to get her to understand what they had done.

“I don’t think Coulson’s a bad guy. But a secret as big as Theta protocol—I can’t ignore that. Whatever he’s doing, it needs to be out in the light of day.”

May had stared straight ahead and thought of all the meetings she sat through with Coulson since she arrived at the Playground, all the secrets of his she kept from the team, all the things she kept from Skye. For months, she had been worried about his carving and the carving alone. She had never even thought there was a bigger secret that she might have been missing.
She has no idea what she’s even looking for as she scours files now for any clues to Theta protocol.

She’d covered for Jemma when it came to light that she’d helped Fitz smuggle out the Toolbox. The biochemist had been less than happy when May did it by more or less throwing Fitz under the bus for the stunt and had said as much later when they were alone.

“They raided the base for that box!” May had snapped, feeling the fading injuries in her body prickle with the memory. “You’re lucky you’re not in a cell!”

“I can’t believe this!” the girl had gaped, looking betrayed. “You’re on their side?”

“It’s not about sides,” May snapped, hating herself even as she said it. “It’s about the truth.”

But there’s no truth to be found as she sits back in her chair at a table in Coulson’s office, staring at the piles and piles of useless documents. All she’s managed to uncover are more secrets and not a single answer.

And, more than that, it’s been five days and she hasn’t heard a word from Skye or Coulson. She’s seen the footage from the quinjets of Deathlok breaking both Coulson and Hunter out of custody, but there was no sign of Skye. May doesn’t want to assume the worst, but it’s hard to keep the possibility from entering her mind. As tempting as it seems to time travel to some other future time and interrogate someone to find out how all this is all going to work out, she makes herself stay put. She’s here to protect the one part of her team that is present. There’s no one else to take her place if she leaves now.

A soft knock at the door startles her, and she flips closed the surveillance photos of Coulson meeting with Andrew as she looks over and sees Simmons standing in the doorway.

“Any progress on tracking down Deathlok’s hardware?” May asks immediately, referring to the task she’d set Simmons to that afternoon.

“Not yet,” the scientist says tiredly, taking a few small steps into the room. She has a cup on a saucer in her hands, which May assumes is Simmons's until the girl draws close to the table and sets the cup at May’s elbow.

“I thought you might like some tea,” Simmons says softly before taking a half-step back. “And I also know I owe you an apology.”

“It doesn’t matter,” May says, looking back down at the work in front of her. “You can be mad—”

“I don’t need to be, and I don’t want to be,” Simmons cuts her off firmly, and May looks up at her again. The girl’s face is set, her lips are pursed, and May is struck all over again by how much Simmons has grown in the past year. The hair that she chopped short during her time undercover at Hydra has grown out again, the loose curls now barely brushing her shoulders. May wishes she could say it’s the haircut making Simmons look older, but she knows it’s far from the only thing.

“You did exactly what you always do, May,” Simmons goes on, her hands floating together to clasp each other loosely in front of her waist. “You did what you could to keep the people closest to you safe. I know you care about Fitz, just like you care about me, but he’s not here and I am. So thank you for doing what you did. I’m sorry I snapped at you.”

May looks down again to hide a sad smile.

“You don’t have anything to apologize for. You were trying to protect Fitz, just like I was trying to protect you. Problem is, we can’t do both at the same time.”
A short moment of silence follows, and May doesn’t speak in case Simmons needs an easy exit. She blindly moves the papers in front of her around, waiting for the girl to leave, but instead, she hears the surprising sound of her shuffling closer.

“My sentiment from yesterday still stands,” Simmons says in a quiet voice, suddenly sounding much younger. “I’m glad you’re back.”

Out of the corner of her eye, she sees one of Simmons’s hands drift towards her only to be pulled back, so May looks up and meets her halfway.

“I’m glad you’re here too, Simmons,” May says quietly, catching the girl’s eye. “I know the year’s been harder on you than maybe any of us. But I’m glad you’re still here.”

They’re both missing their complementary pieces right now—Skye. Coulson. Fitz. And May knows that if she were to catch Simmons’ hand and squeeze it reassuringly, it would feel wrong, and they would both only be aware of the absence of the people they would normally be reaching for.

But it seems that Simmons understands that too, because while she doesn’t reach for May again, she does lean just a little closer until their arms brush, a brief press that is barely more than proof of life, but it’s something. May leans subtly into the contact, accepting and reassuring, closing her eyes and focusing on the warmth of the faithful presence next to her.

Their team is scattered to the winds, but they can at least be certain of each other.

And for both of them, for now, this will have to be enough.

Skye:

July second.

She heard everything Jiaying said after that, but this is the only fact she’s been able to make herself swallow so far.

July second. You were born on July second.

Gentle fingers brush a lock of her hair off her shoulder, and Skye finally turns around to face Jiaying again.

“Are you okay?” the woman asks gently. The scars on her face suddenly seem so much more brutal, now that Skye knows why they’re there.

She manages to nod slowly.

Jiaying clasps her hands in front of herself, and Skye sees her bite her lip once before speaking again.

“I’m sorry I didn’t say something before. I wanted to run to you the second I saw you, wrap you in my arms…”

“Why didn’t you?” Skye asks.

It doesn’t make sense. Why didn’t she come to me when I first got here?

“Because you were forced into going through the mist,” Jiaying answers, looking down. “And joining our people had to be your choice. You deserve that.”
Forced away from your family. Forced back to them.

She wanted to give you a choice for once.

Jiaying looks up at her again, eyes shining. “We searched for you for years,” she says, taking a small step closer. “After your father pieced me back together, we scoured the earth. We were ruthless in hunting for you. One morning, I woke up and I barely recognized myself. Your father was buried in the new, horrible man he had become. He couldn’t admit that our baby was gone. I thought I had to accept it. I’m so sorry.”

Skye doesn’t think, she just walks forward until she’s in the woman’s arms.

It’s a moment she’d imagined so many different times and in so many different ways throughout her childhood, the day her parents would finally come find her and she would run into the arms of people who had never given up on her… She’d never given much thought to setting or circumstances, just on the feelings of relief and peace and joy she would feel as she raced away from the apathetic families of her childhood and into the arms of someone who had spent years waiting to hold her.

She’s much taller and older than the age she had pictured herself being when that day finally came, which only makes this moment feel more surreal.

This is the woman who carried you when you were a baby, who named you, who gave you the gift she’s teaching you how to use now…

She’s still alive. And she’s here.

“I thought if I couldn’t protect you, then maybe I could help protect people like you,” Jiaying is murmuring over Skye’s shoulder, “so I came here. I’ll make up for all of it, I swear.”

The woman abruptly pulls away, clasping Skye’s shoulders to keep her close.

“But right now,” Jiaying says sternly, “this has to be our secret.”


Jiaying looks around at the buildings surrounding them. “Let’s take a walk.”

Skye thinks she understands before they make it out of the little village, where Jiaying leads them to a deserted pagoda on a slope a few hundred meters from the nearest building.

“You don’t want to tell them because you’re responsible for deciding what to do with me,” Skye says, looking over at Jiaying. It’s almost sundown now, and the breeze feels much more threatening than it did this morning.

“It’s complicated,” the woman says, looking out over the valley. “I’m responsible for everyone here. My rules must be enforced. People have died when the process for selection has been ignored.”

“But I already skipped that process,” Skye reminds her, wrapping her arms around herself.

“And I protected you from the swift response that usually brings,” Jiaying says, a serious note in her voice. “It’s happened before.”

When Skye makes a perplexed face at her, Jiaying continues.

“There was a woman once. Her name was Eva. Russian. Strong-willed like you. She didn’t trust my
judgment, so she stole a batch of terragin crystals and fled. She got caught up with some criminals in Bahrain.”

Something swoops in Skye’s stomach.

*But...no...*

*It can’t be...*

“A civilian girl and a few of our guys were trapped in a building with a Gifted.”

“I know this story,” Skye exhales, though she wants to be wrong. “An agent went in and...killed her?”

Jiaying’s face is grim. “I wish it had been that simple. With so much strength, Eva was bound to be noticed out there in the world. But she didn’t steal the crystals for herself. She stole them for her daughter, Katya.”

A civilian girl...

“I had seen a darkness in the girl,” Jiaying goes on. “I didn’t think she should go through the mist, but Eva wanted her daughter to receive her birthright. She trusted her judgment over mine. But Katya was too young—after she changed, she went insane. With one touch, she leached off of emotions like a parasite. Gordon and I had tracked Eva and her daughter to Bahrain, but we were too late. SHIELD got there before us and put them both down.”

Skye closes her eyes, fighting a feeling of nausea.

“May used to be different.”

“She wouldn’t tell me what happened in there.”

“When she came out of the building, it was like that part of her was gone.”

She thinks of childhood visits when she had sat on May’s lap and asked question after question about time travel and how it was possible, how May’s answer had been the same ambiguous one every single time...

“I stared time-travelling when a Bad Thing happened to me.”

“Katya had to be stopped,” Jiaying is saying, seeming oblivious to Skye’s inner chaos, “but not by SHIELD. She was my responsibility.”

Skye can’t look at her. She keeps her eyes closed and tries to focus only on breathing.

*This is all connected. May didn’t know it, but it was never just your story and her story...*

*Her...Bahrain...the time travel...me...my mother...it’s all connected. We’re a circle with no beginning...*

“You make the rules,” she manages in a thin voice. “And now everyone will think you broke them for me?”

“Our people know too well what a woman will do for her daughter.”

They stand in silence for a moment, the sun dropping lower and burning the valley with orange light.
The air feels colder, and Skye hugs herself tighter.

“We should get back before the sun goes down,” Jiaying says then, seeming to finally notice Skye’s body language. They turn together back towards the path, and Jiaying slips a gentle hand around Skye’s arm as they walk back into the village.

Skye knows this should feel comforting, but all she feels is cold.

“I do have one request,” Jiaying says just before they reach the little circle of buildings, turning to face Skye. “Now that you know.”

“What is it?” Skye asks, forcing herself to meet the woman’s eyes.

“I may have stopped looking for you, but your father never did. He’s the reason I’m standing face to face with you right now, and I want to thank him for that.”

Somehow, Skye manages to feel more sick. “So he is here.”

Jiaying nods once. “He’s been kept separated from almost everyone all this time, but I did tell him that you had come. I was hoping…”

But Skye is already shaking her head. “He may have been trying to put his family back together, but he’s been killing people all along the way. He’s almost killed two people who are like family to me.”

“I know,” Jiaying says, nodding grimly. “That’s why I’m just asking for one dinner. If we could just spend a little bit of time together, you just might see how I could have fallen in love with him, long ago. One dinner, and then I’ll send him away from here. If you don’t want to, you’ll never have to see him again.”

This catches her by surprise, and Skye contemplates the offer.

She has so much to hate Cal for. But she also knows that she can’t pretend like all of this, good and bad, isn’t because of him.

“One dinner,” Skye agrees, nodding slowly. “That’s all I’ll be able to handle.”

Jiaying smiles, glowing in the orange light. “That’s all I’m asking for.”

Cal has a bouquet of daisies in his hand when the two of them walk into the room. He’s wearing a coat and tie, and his long hair is combed back with water, though it’s already flopping out of its attempt at a style.

“Oh,” he says softly as Skye follows Jiaying into the room. A smile, one only slightly tinged with mania, flickers on his face. “I had wanted so badly to make everything perfect for tonight, and suddenly…it is!”

For a moment, Skye stares at him, trying to push down on memories of a football field in Wisconsin and a theater in Puerto Rico.

“These are for you,” the man says suddenly, and Skye forces herself not to flinch as he moves towards her and hands her the bouquet. Once they’re in her hands, he straightens, facing them soberly.

“I want to thank you,” he begins, glancing between them, “both of you, for giving me another shot. I know that my actions—“
“Cal,” Jiaying says, cutting him off and drawing his gaze. “Skye doesn’t know when her birthday is.”

The man’s face lights up.

“I do! July second!”

He grins at them, and Skye feels herself smiling in spite of herself. Cal turns and scurries over to the table, pulling out chairs for her and Jiaying before bringing them each a crystal wine glass.

“It was a gorgeous summer night, a big beautiful moon in the sky…1988,” he says happily as he pours champagne into the three glasses. Jiaying is smiling kindly at him, her eyes glowing. “You know your mother—she actually cleaned before she told me?”

“Wait… ’88?” Skye suddenly repeats, catching their attention. “I’m 26?”

*My birthday wasn’t just off by a few months…it’s off by a whole year and a half?*

She laughs disbelievingly. “That’s so messed up.”

Noticing the two adults’ concerned expressions, Skye quickly catches herself and reaches for her glass.

“Oh, sorry,” she says, meeting their eyes. She raises her glass. “To…26.”

“Yes,” Cal agrees, raising his glass. He and Jiaying share a smile across the table.

“Here’s to 26!

Their glasses touch, and Skye tries to memorize this moment, her first **anything** with her whole family, but she also senses darker memories crowding over her shoulder, waiting to be acknowledged.

She does feel her chest loosen a little the longer Cal and Jiaying talk, easy smiles and familiar banter that speaks of years Skye has missed, before or after her birth, and she agrees that Jiaying was right. There is still a man inside Cal, a man Jiaying had, at least for a while, loved, and he had clearly loved Jiaying. Maybe even still did.

**Two people who scoured the earth looking for you.**

**Who never forgot about you.**

At one point, Jiaying turns towards Skye at the table, reaching beneath the hem of her long jacket and drawing something out.

“I thought you might want this back,” she offers, holding the object out to Skye, who can’t believe her eyes—it’s her phone.

She forgets to not look too eager as she grabs the device from Jiaying, who chuckles a little as Skye hastily turns it on.

“Gordon mentioned that you had asked for it,” the woman says, and Skye glances up at her as the device glows to life. “I must ask, though, that you disable the GPS inside it. We have worked hard to not be found and would rather stay that way.”

“Okay,” Skye agrees without thinking, punching in her code and unlocking the phone. She disables
the GPS quickly, flashing the screen at Jiaying so she can see.

“Thank you,” her mother says with a nod.

“I thought you might want to take a picture,” Cal offers from the other side of the table, a hopeful smile on his face.

“Oh! Uh, yeah, sure!” Skye agrees, still unable to move past how surreal this all is. “Uh…okay, how about you guys get close?”

She snaps a picture of the two of them raising their glasses from the other side of the table, then lets Jiaying stay between her and Cal as the three of them move their chairs closer together and Skye flips on the front-facing camera for a selfie.

The shutter closes, trapping the three of them in a frame together forever, and Skye hopes her smile looks natural enough.

She doesn’t hug Cal when Jiaying finally says that Skye needs to rest and leads her to the door, but she doesn’t cringe either when he touches her arm gently and says kind things in goodnight. Jiaying walks her back to her cabin and gives her another hug at the door.

“Thank you,” she says quietly over Skye’s shoulder. “I will never forget this evening.”


Once she’s alone in her room, though, she curls into her bed with her phone and checks the wifi/cell signal on her phone. She’s unsurprised to find nothing, but she types a message to May anyway.

I’m okay.

She hits send. A little red dot warns her that the message is undelivered, but it still makes her feel a tiny bit better.

When she turns out the light, it only takes a few minutes for the chaos to crowd into the void with her, the twisted circle that her life has formed with Jiaying’s, with Cal’s, with May’s...

May visited you because she time-travels because she once killed a little girl because your mother didn’t get there in time...

But your father never stopped looking for you. He’s the reason you have these powers now. He’s the reason you met your mother today.

Also, you’re 26.

Skye unlocks her phone and opens the photo cache, looking at the two most recent photos. The three of them, together for the first time in at least two decades. Her parents, glasses raised, celebrating a very belated birthday with her.

But even as she stares at the pictures, Skye can only think of another toast, another birthday…so she scrolls up to better times and looks at the few pictures of the past few months in her phone, mostly pictures of and with May in various quiet moments. Skye swipes through pictures until she reaches a video file from back in the early summer, a five-minute-long clip taken during a rowdy night in the base, just a few weeks before Simmons left for her undercover mission, when Trip had forced everyone down to the common area for a game night and, amazingly, not a single person had sat it out. The video is a blur of noise and faces, smiles and laughter and stories told with slight slurs, but
somewhere in that chaos, she sees everyone she loves most. May, Coulson, Simmons, Fitz, Trip…

She hopes they’re safe, wherever they are.

She clutches the phone to her chest and listens to their voices until she falls asleep.
Aaaaaaaa okay, June was definitely a blink-and-it's-gone month for me, and then I turned around and it was Daisy's birthday, so I tried hard to get this chapter finished yesterday...but it's still July 2, in America, right?

This chapter is obviously kind of dense with the snowballing events that are building up to the s2 finale, so go figure my over-writing ass could barely keep it under 10,000 words. Obviously, with Trip still being around and May and Skye having the relationship that they have, some events are going to play out a little differently than they did in canon, but I have a couple of twists planned. Speculate away about how this is all going to end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

December 31, 2014—January 1, 2015: Skye is 25 26, May is 45

Lincoln meets her again for breakfast the next morning.

“So. How was the family reunion?”

She had been more than a little startled when he said it, but it made sense—she’d glimpsed him passing their family dinner the night before. Whether he had already known or suspected was unclear, but it had been nice to know that there was one person here she could talk about yesterday’s life-changing news with. Once they had swiped pastries from the breakfast table and were alone again, far enough from any listening ears (she hoped), she had told him everything—about Cal and the trail of death that had led her team to Puerto Rico, about the showdown in Wisconsin, the dinner the night before.

“I understand that he was just trying to put his family back together, but it was…horrifying,” Skye finishes, swinging her leg mindlessly as she looks out over the valley. “Jiaying keeps saying that he’s not one of us, but he’s obviously not an ordinary man, and he’s lethal when he’s angry. If he gets separated from us against his will, I can only imagine how he’ll react.”

“You should talk to Jiaying,” Lincoln says with a shrug. “She’s your mom. And she ought to know him better than anyone. Plus, she’s obviously going to be the one swinging the axe—you may have the best chance of softening the blow. You are the First Daughter around here, after all.”

The title sounds strange to her ears. It’s been a long time since she thought of herself as anyone’s daughter.

Jiaying, confusingly, is a lot less sympathetic when Skye finally gets the chance to talk to her that afternoon.

“Look, I know Cal’s dangerous, but he’s better when he’s with us,” Skye leads off, once they’re alone in the room where Skye had first woken up at Afterlife.

“That may be true,” Jiaying acknowledges, “but he can’t stay here.”
“Well, could we give him a heads-up that he’s saying goodbye when Gordon drops him off?” Skye suggests, sure that that isn’t asking too much.

“And risk how he gets?” her mother says with a shake of her head. “You think you’ve seen him at his worst—you haven’t.”

Images of the two shattered bodies that her team had found in a blood-soaked room last year flash through her mind.

That wasn’t his worst?

“Well, that’s my point,” Skye presses. “You know how he’ll get when Gordon just abandons him in the middle of nowhere.”

“Not nowhere,” Jiaying reminds her. “We’re taking him home!”

Home. He must have had one once, before all this.

Still…

“It doesn’t matter!” Skye insists. “He will feel abandoned, and people will get hurt.”

Jiaying shakes her head once, looking away. “Those people aren’t my concern.”

The dismissiveness in her voice is startling, and Skye feels her resolve strengthen.

“Well they’re mine,” she says firmly, waiting for Jiaying to look at her again before adding, “I’m a S.H.I.E.L.D. agent.”

The look in Jiaying’s hints at pride, but she still purses her lips, and her reply is firm. “Sometimes as a leader, I have to do things I’d rather not do.”

“Then let me go with him,” Skye blurts out.

Jiaying looks at her, visibly surprised, but still shakes her head once.

“What will you do?” she asks skeptically, making Skye immediately feel defensive.

“I don’t know…just…keep him company. Soften the blow. Give him a kinder let-down.”

“Why do you want to?” her mother asks, sounding genuinely confused, which just makes Skye prickle more.

Why is she being like this?

“Maybe I remember how it feels to be ripped away from people who I thought cared about me.”

It’s a dig, to be sure, but it gets her point across, and Jiaying looks down knowingly, pursing her lips again before raising her head.

“My decision stands—he has to leave. But I’ll arrange for Gordon to drop you off with him and pick you up when you’re ready to come back.”

“Thank you,” Skye says with a grateful sigh. “I just…he deserves more than being dumped like an unwanted puppy. I’ll tell him I want to see where he lived, and then we’ll take it from there.” She starts to move towards the door.
I’ll get back into civilization and call the team to come get Cal…

“If you’re going, though,” Jiaying’s voice carries over her shoulder, “I’ll need you to leave your phone here.”

A pang of unease shoots through her, and Skye looks back at Jiaying, brow furrowed.

“Why?” She knows it sounds childish, but she’s willing to be petulant at this point.

Jiaying only shakes her head tiredly. “I have enough security risks to be concerned about at the moment without SHIELD getting involved. Things tend to get messy when our two worlds meet.”

Skye stares at her, the sick feeling in her stomach growing as she remembers the other story her mother told her yesterday. Jiaying looks back sternly, unapologetically, and Skye eventually sighs.

“I’ll bring my phone to you in the morning before I go,” Skye finally answers, taking a deliberate step away from the woman, through the door. “But, you know, as long as I’m here, SHIELD’s already involved.”

She leaves before her mother can respond to that.

The next morning, Jiaying escorts her to the place where Cal has been staying. Gordon is already inside, her mother says, and he’ll be ready to pick her up whenever Skye calls for him after her time with Cal runs its course. Skye doesn’t have any cash or cards to take with her, but she still has a plan to get her hands on another phone as she pulls her own device from her pocket to return to Jiaying.

“Before you turn it off,” Jiaying says, stopping Skye’s finger on the power button with a light touch of her hand, “could I see the picture from our dinner the other night?”

Her tone is kinder than yesterday, and Skye smiles.

“Sure,” she answers, opening the photo folder and scrolling through thumbnails to the most recent photos at the bottom. She selects the picture of Jiaying and Cal and holds the phone out for her mother to see. Jiaying puts a steadying hand on the phone and smiles tenderly towards the screen.

“It felt like a dream,” the woman says, reaching out and swiping the photo, obviously looking for the subsequent picture of the three of them together, but instead of flipping forward, she mistakenly flips backward to the last photo Skye had taken before the dinner, one that preceded even the mission in Puerto Rico.

“Other way,” Skye says, flipping two photos left to show Jiaying the one she must have been looking for, but after looking for a moment, Jiaying flips back to the third photo she’d glimpsed.

“So this is your team?”

It’s a picture from the week following Jemma’s return from her Hydra mission, a belated Thanksgiving celebration that was hardly traditional, since it had ended with nearly everyone taking part in a drunken marksmanship competition down in the shooting range, one that Coulson eventually shut down after Hunter tried to break the Bambino blaster out of their vault, much to everyone’s disappointment. The picture is from the chaotic dinner that had started the night, mostly comprised of alcohol and carryout pizza that Mack had picked up at the end of a supply run. At least ten agents can be seen in the photo—a selfie that Skye had taken from her place on the big sofa, snuggled up against May and with Jemma hanging, slightly tipsy, on her other shoulder. Trip is leaning over the back of the sofa with a wide grin and Hunter is pulling a repulsive face in the background, a few feet away from Mack, who is posing with Fitz in a noogie that the engineer seems...
to be *almost* tolerating. Coulson, eyes shadowed from what Skye now knows was many late-night carving sessions, is leaning tiredly against the counter with a beer in one hand, and Bobbi, her brown hair nearly rinsed back to its natural blonde color, leans into the frame beside him, pretending to kiss his bald spot.

“Yeah...this is them,” Skye says, smiling involuntarily at the picture. A painful feeling lurks under the warmth of the memory.

*Where are they? Are they okay?*

Jiaying’s hand moves, pinching the photo and zooming in slightly on Skye’s face where it rests comfortably on an indulgent May’s shoulder.

“Is that her?” Jiaying asks softly. “Your best friend?”

There’s something off in Jiaying’s tone, and Skye glances up at her. The woman is staring seriously at the screen, her face betraying nothing.

Skye only briefly considers lying, but it makes little sense when the evidence is right there in front of them.

“Yeah,” she answers, attempting to tug the phone away, but the strength of Jiaying’s grip surprises her as she holds the phone firmly between them.

“An agent, of course?” Jiaying goes on, still staring at the picture, and Skye realizes too late what Jiaying is seeing.

“*SHIELD* got to Katya first...”

Skye is barely breathing as she pulls harder on the phone, and Jiaying abruptly releases it, looking up at Skye as she quickly turns off her phone. It’s password and fingerprint-protected, but Skye feels her heart hammering as she holds out the phone to Jiaying.

*She remembers her. She said she got Bahrain right after SHIELD did...she must remember May...*

“Your friend,” Jiaying says as she takes the phone and pockets it, “does she have...abilities?”

The woman’s gaze is stern, and alarms are blaring in Skye’s head.

“I...I don’t know,” she fumbles, afraid to say anything at all.

A look of concern drops into Jiaying’s expression, but it feels unconvincing. “It’s all right,” she says in a gentler tone. “You can tell me.”

Skye’s heart is thudding in her chest so loudly that she’s sure Jiaying must be able to hear it. “I...”

The door beside them opens suddenly, and she jumps within her skin.

Cal appears, smiling brightly (unsettlingly), and Gordon is following right behind him.

“Look at this...” her father says glancing between Jiaying and Skye, bouncing a little on his feet. “Another day, all together!”

“At are you ready?” Gordon asks impatiently, stepping between the two of them and turning his face towards Skye.
She nods, forgetting to answer the blind man verbally. The last thing she sees before Gordon takes her arm and the world turns over is Jiaying’s careful gaze.

Milwaukee is every kind of awkward, but time alone with Cal is not as bad as Skye was expecting. She lifts a phone off a stranger on the street and calls the Playground’s secure line, nearly gasping in relief at the sound of May’s voice on the other end. She doesn’t have time to ask about the team, but she’s optimistic if May’s the one answering the phone. She drops the phone in a trash can with the line open after telling May the only things she had time to say—“I’m with Cal but I won’t be for long, and when I leave him he’s going to be dangerous. You have to come get him and make sure he doesn’t hurt anyone” —and walked off down the street with her father, hoping SHIELD’s response would be quick.

Cal takes her to his old doctor’s practice after that, and she sees his full name on the door.

C.L. Johnson, MD.

"Johnson," Skye reads, nodding at the glass as Cal unlocks the door. “Is that your last name?”

He follows her gaze and smiles. “It was. Pretty ordinary, huh?” The locks slide back, and he leads the way into the office. She follows him in, trying the name out on her tongue.


Cal is pulling something from a file cabinet while she takes in the waiting room and his office. Shelves full of medical textbooks. Diagrams of the body. A little hula girl on his desk, just like the one she has back on the Bus.

He was a normal person once, Skye thinks, a strange concept. Not always the monster you’ve seen.

“How is all of this still here?” she asks, looking at the coat of dust on every surface.

“I own the building,” Cal answers, opening a loud drawer in the file cabinet. “I wasn’t rich, but you would have grown up quite comfortable.”

He’s been making comments like that this whole day—ideas of what could have been.

That’s where we would have sent you to school.

Your mother was going to finish medical school in America and be a doctor too.

I would have helped you with your science fair projects...we would have gone to the father-daughter dances together...

Skye cranes her ear towards the outside and hopes for the sounds of a quinjet.

Cal is unrolling a set of surgeon’s tools on his desk when Skye glances over at him again.

“My grandfather’s field kit. WWII,” Cal says proudly as Skye steps closer to look. “I used these to put your mother back together again.”

That’s a grotesque thought as Skye suddenly remembers what he’d said in San Juan—Whitehall cut her to pieces...he took her organs...her blood...dumped her in a ditch like she was garbage...

Back in the theater in San Juan, Cal had said that when Jiaying had been taken, he left Skye with people he trusted and tracked her from China to Europe. Had found her next-to-dead, the needle in a
haystack. He’d saved her life…and then come back to find his daughter gone.

*SHIELD* or *Hydra*—is there any way to know which?—took you… Skye thinks to herself, *and when they got back, your parents started the hunt for you. A trail of death…*

The thought turns her stomach. But she thinks for the first time that she understands how one man can have so much rage in him. She’d thought she’d suffered, growing up like an orphan…she had never imagined how much it might have hurt to be the one who remembered having a family and then lost it all.

“Your mother’s gift was the real miracle,” Cal is saying, pulling Skye back to the present, and she suddenly remembers what Jiaying had said about her gift.

“My gift is only seldom useful. Hopefully, you’ll never have to see it.”

“She’s a walking miracle, your mother. The way she suffered and endured and fought through it…”

*He still loves her,* Skye thinks, staring sadly at him. *But she doesn’t care about him at all. Her community is priority now.*

Guilt clenches Skye’s stomach at the thought of how this day is going to end.

“You can’t hang onto the past like this,” she says quietly, glancing at Cal, who looks perplexed. “You need to move on. Jiaying, she’s responsible for all those people. And I’m an adult now. We can’t turn back the clock.”

*Only May can do that and even then, she can’t change anything. Things have to happen the way they happened.*

“This doesn’t mean we can’t see each other. I’ll come visit,” she promises, but it’s the flash in his eyes that makes her realize, too late, what she’s forgotten to say first.

“Visit?” he repeats, looking at her. “Where are you going?”

She’s saved from explaining by a thump in the hallway, and Cal plucks a scalpel from the kit in front of him.

*No…don’t hurt Gordon…or May…or any more SHIELD agents…*

“Stay here,” he says sternly, brushing past Skye, but she ignores him and follows him out into the hallway.

And it’s not Gordon, or a SHIELD team.

It’s Lincoln.

“What are you doing here?” Skye demands in a low voice, attempting to step between Cal and the younger man.

“Jiaying sent me to make sure everything was cool,” he says, glancing between her and Cal.

“Why wouldn’t everything be cool?” Cal demands, setting the scalpel on a nearby shelf.

Skye turns to face him, to say something comforting when she can tell he already understands what’s happening, but Lincoln yanks her back with a cautious, muttered “Skye”…and suddenly everything suddenly happens very fast.
“Her name is Daisy!” Cal shouts, hurling Lincoln into a filing cabinet, where he crumples to the floor, dazed. Skye rushes to his side as Cal continues shouting, hauling him to his feet just as a black-clad Hydra soldier suddenly appears from an adjoining hallway.

What is Hydra doing here?!

Lincoln subdues the first soldier with a bolt of electricity to the chest. When more soldiers appear, Cal turns and faces them fearlessly while Lincoln yanks her into another hallway. “Don’t use your powers,” he warns, shoving her ahead of him. “You could bring the building down. Just run. Get somewhere safe and call for Gordon—he’ll come for you.”

Each of them can handle themselves, she tells herself, racing down the hall towards the back stairs. SHIELD should be here soon—just bide your time and then you can go back with them…

She stumbles onto a lower level hallway and sees movement out of the corner of her eye, but this one’s not a Hydra soldier. It’s Mike Petersen.

“Mike!” she yelps, racing towards him. “What are you doing here?”

“You need to get out of here,” he warns, raising his weaponized arm towards her, and she skids to a halt. “Coulson will be here soon, but Hydra’s here already. Go!”

Skye turns and races back towards the stairs, this time headed for the roof.

What the hell is happening?

She’s nearly to the top level when she hears a familiar voice on the other side of a door, someone who sounds like he’s losing a fight.

Coulson.

She wrenches open the door and sees that it is Coulson…and he’s being assisted by Ward.

You’re still alive?

“Skye!” they both say as the Hydra agents in front of them fall.

“Coulson!” she breathes, confused and relieved.

And then suddenly, Gordon.

“I need to get you out of here,” he says, reaching for her arm as blue light encloses them, cutting her off from Coulson.

“No! Not yet!” Skye shouts, barely seeing the blur of a third body crashing into them…

The next thing she sees is the main pavilion of Afterlife and Cal staggering to his feet between her and Gordon, murder in his eyes…

“How dare you!”

January 1, 2015

May:
She had been in the middle of mediating another standoff between Mack, Bobbi, and Simmons when the call bases’ landline rang. Skye’s words were rushed and she sounded anxious, but relief immediately flooded through May at the sound of the girl’s voice.

“Where are you?” she demanded, not caring about Bobbi and Mack looking on. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” Skye had answered quickly. “I’m with Cal, but I won’t be for long…”

There had been no explanation, but when Skye suddenly stopped mid-sentence and there was a rustling sound like the phone had been dropped into a pile of paper, her voice and Cal’s could still be heard.

“She left the line open,” Simmons muttered, watching the screen of her tablet.

“She doesn’t sound like a hostage,” Mack observed quietly, his face grim as he listened to an exchange between Cal and Skye about ice cream sandwiches.

“More like she’s playing along,” Bobbi said, looking over at May. “Mack and I can take a team and go get them.”

May nodded once. “Do it.”

Bobbi and Mack hurried out of the room, and Simmons lifted her gaze to May.

“They’re in Milwaukee,” she announced, tapping the screen of her tablet. “I’ll send the location to the quinjet.”

May nodded silently, her hands tensing into loose fists, which she rested on Coulson’s desk.

What are you doing, Skye? Where have you been?

“She’s a good agent, May,” Simmons adds quietly, drawing May’s attention upwards again. Simmons dark gaze is knowing and sympathetic. “She’ll be all right.”

May purses her lips and looks down. “I’m starting to understand why Coulson wouldn’t stay in the base once we started field operations again.”

“You’re doing more than your share, May,” Simmons says, wrapping a hand around May’s shoulder. “All we can do now is wait.”

When Mack and Bobbi do come back, it’s without Cal, but they do have Coulson. And Hunter. And Fitz.

And Ward and Agent 33.

“Well isn’t this a pretty picture,” Grant Ward says, sauntering down the ramp, taking May in with a cool glance before glancing around at the hangar. May makes a fist behind one elbow and does her best not to snap his neck.

Coulson sends Ward and 33 off with armed escorts, and May falls in step beside him as he moves off towards his office.

“You finally come back and you bring Grant Ward?” she mutters.

“I know,” Coulson sighs with a tired shake of his head. “Let’s get everyone in a meeting and get this over with.”
Gonzales had taken a team on the Bus as soon as Bobbi had picked up Coulson and his crew and met them in the middle, so he sits among their circle while Weaver and Oliver stream in on the big screen behind them. Ward, apparently a necessary part of this mission, fills in the circle, and Bobbi stands across from him next to May.

*If only looks could kill…*

Together, they watch the footage of surgeons removing Deathlok’s camera eye. May hasn’t seen Deathlok since their team’s last mission in search of “the Clairvoyant”, but she feels the tiniest bit sympathetic as she remembers Mike Petersen, the mission that had first brought their team together.

Had brought them to Skye.

“Hydra has been running experiments on enhanced people,” Coulson explains to the assembled group. “Strucker and List have set up a base in the Arctic, and we know that Mike Petersen has been taken there now. Mr. Ward here has placed Sunil Bakshi on the inside, and that’s all we need to get in with a small rescue team before sending in the armada to destroy the base.”

“I know Bakshi,” Bobbi cuts in. “He’s a Hydra agent.”

“Not anymore—” Ward interrupts, and May can hardly stand to look at him. “Now he works for me.”

“Says the Hydra agent,” May snaps.

*He doesn’t even deserve to stand in the same room as these agents…*

Ward only shrugs easily. “My days with Hydra are over—I’m just an independent contractor, trying to make amends.”

“We remain skeptical,” Gonzales grumbles, and May is thankful for the small consolation of knowing no one in the room is happy to see Ward.

“Because the base is in the Arctic with nothing around for miles,” Coulson goes on, bringing them back to the task at hand, “we’ll need to take in a small team. The plan is to rescue the SHIELD prisoners, then disable the missile defense system around the base so that SHIELD jets can fly in safely to bomb the facility.”

“You believe a small team can do this?” Bobbi asks.

Coulson looks the closest to his old self in months as he faces her confidently. “I believe my team can.”

They put the mission to a vote, and Bobbi votes yes while Weaver and Oliver vote no.

“It’s too risky,” the British woman explains calmly.

Gonzales, surprisingly, votes yes.

“That leaves you with the deciding vote, Agent May,” he says, looking at her.

Coulson looks over, startled, but May keeps her eyes on Gonzales. “I’d like a word in private with Agent Coulson first.”

The other agents clear the room, May closes the link to Oliver and Weaver, and as soon as the door is closed, Coulson rounds on her.
“Since when did you become a high-ranking member of Team Gonzales?” he demands, a note of betrayal in his voice.

“She had to run the base while you were gone,” she snaps, gesturing at the space around them. “Having a seat on their board allowed me to keep you safe.”

“I was fine on my own,” he says, and she narrows her eyes.

“Seems like that’s how you operate best.”

He actually looks offended. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“That you’ve been lying to me! Ever since SHIELD fell!” She points at the piles of folders on the floor beside his desk. “All those overseas trips you were taking? Want to tell me what Theta protocol is?”

He looks a little surprised, but he simply responds, “No.”

Betrayal pricks at her heart. “Because you don’t trust me?”

He shakes his head. “Because you’re not the director of SHIELD,” he says simply.

“Neither are you,” she mutters. “Not anymore.”

Coulson’s mouth pulls into a thin line. “We’ve always had our secrets, May. You had a secret line to Fury behind my back for months.”

“And you were meeting with my ex-husband behind my back!” she snaps, remembering the surveillance photos Jemma had shown her.

But Coulson shakes his head once. “You’re not really upset about that—you’re upset that you didn’t know as much as you think you did.”

“You should have told me!” she says coldly, glaring through the height difference between them. “I can’t protect you if I don’t know what you’re doing.”

“That is not your job!” Coulson says disbelievingly.

“That is my only job. That is the beginning and end of our relationship.”

She sees the spark of surprise and pain in his eyes at those words, and she looks away, taking a steadying breath.

She didn’t mean that. She knows that’s not true. They’ve been friends for so long that that’s far from the only thing they share. But it is the way things began, and still the way she’s afraid things might someday end.

"I'm sorry," she says, unable to look at him. "You and I both know that's not true."

They both take another breath, not looking at each other, and Coulson finally sighs.

“I know why you did what you did, May,” he says. “I’m sorry I lied to you, and I will apologize later, at length. But right now, List has Mike Petersen, and the man who was with Skye, and no one knows how many other enhanced prisoners. Can we put this behind us and go rescue them, and then go find Skye?”
May stares coldly at him for a moment longer before marching to the door. She steps out into the hallway with Gonzales and takes a deep breath.

“I vote yes. Morse, go get the Bus ready. And tell the team wheels up in an hour.”

**Skye:**

Cal is not the Tasmanian-devil anger-tornado she was expecting as they all stagger to their feet in the middle of a crowd of Afterlife residents, but he certainly shouts loudly.

“Didn’t expect to see back here so soon, did you, my love?” he calls as Jiaying approaches them, looking less than thrilled to see him. “No after such a well-planned banishing.”

“Where’s Lincoln?” Skye gasps, looking around at the knots of people watching the scene.

*Is he still...did Gordon not get him first?*

“You took me from my home!” Cal is shouting at Jiaying, seemingly oblivious to his audience.

“Cal, this isn’t your home,” her mother reminds him flatly.

“I know that now!” he says in a dramatic voice with a manic smile.

“Hey! Lincoln is still out there! Gordon, can you please…”

Gordon nods, taking a step away and disappearing in a flicker of blue light.

“You tried to take me away from our daughter!” Cal says, and Skye sees the other people around them react with whispers and stares. Jiaying notices too, her eyes narrowing.

“Go calm down, Cal,” the woman says in a very level voice. “You and I can discuss this later. There are worse options.”

The last four words are barely said in a different tone, but Skye can hear the threat. If her heart weren’t already racing with the stress of the past fifteen minutes, it might have picked up further.

But then Jiaying turns towards her.

“Are you okay?”

Her tone is gentle, concerned, and Skye nods automatically. “I’m fine.”

Gordon suddenly reappears in the pavilion, blood dripping from a bullet graze across his forehead.

“It was Hydra. I barely got away,” he says breathlessly, pressing his hand against the cut. “They took Lincoln.”

The next few minutes are a blur as Jiaying sends a nearby assistant to disperse the crowd while she hastens Gordon off to the medical building. Skye trails along behind them, listening as Gordon describes the scene he had glimpsed as he was trying to escape.

“It wasn’t just Lincoln they were taking—there was a man there with robotics all over his body. The Hydra team had stunned them and they were carrying them both out.”
“Mike?” Skye gasps, trying to catch up to Gordon. “Did they hurt him?”

“It’s Hydra,” Gordon grimaces as they reach the door of the medical office. “What do you think?”

She attempts to follow them into the office, but Jiaying blocks her with an arm across the doorway.

“I need to speak to Gordon alone right now,” she says calmly, starting to close the door on her. “You can wait out here or go back to my cabin. We’ll talk later.”

Skye opts to stand awkwardly on the porch, working through her relaxing techniques and gathering her questions.

*What was Lincoln doing there?*

*What was Mike doing there?*

*Why was Hydra there?*

*Why was Ward with Coulson?*

*Where was May?*

She has to wait for close to half an hour before the door opens again.

“You can come in now,” Jiaying says, and Skye strides into the shadowed room. Gordon is gone, so Skye rounds on her mother.

“Why was Lincoln there?” she asks immediately, and Jiaying looks away.

“I asked him to go, to keep you safe,” she says grimly. “I was worried about what Cal might do when you left.”

“To keep me safe, or make sure I came back?” Skye demands, folding her arms, and Jiaying looks calmly over at her again.

“It was a mistake—I should never have let you go at all.”

“It was the right thing to do,” Skye reminds her, noticing but choosing to ignore the way Jiaying didn’t deny the accusation. She realizes she’s fighting a losing battle on this front and chooses to hop to another. “How do we get Lincoln back?”

Jiaying sighs sadly. “We don’t. It’s too much of a risk.”

Skye can’t believe what she’s hearing. “Jiaying, it’s Hydra! They will torture him! They will kill him!”

Jiaying’s mouth pulls into a thin line. “I know exactly what Hydra’s capable of doing—I remember.”

Guilt tugs at the bottom of Skye’s stomach, and she drops her eyes so that she won’t look at the scars crisscrossing her mother’s face.

“I’m sorry,” she offers, and she sees Jiaying step closer.

“I wish I could save Lincoln from whatever’s about to happen to him,” Jiaying says, reaching out and touching Skye’s arm until she looks up at her again, “but I suspect that someone is tracking Gordon’s movements. Anyone I send will be at risk too. And Lincoln wouldn’t want me to do that.
These people are important to him—he wouldn’t want them to risk their lives.”

Skye breathes slowly, thinking through her options.

*Lincoln doesn’t deserve this—he didn’t sign up for this.*

*No one here is ready to take on Hydra. They didn’t sign up for that.*

*But I did.*

She takes a deep breath and races out the door to find Gordon.

He’s as unhelpful as he was the last time she asked him for something.

“No one enters or leaves Afterlife until Jiaying thinks it’s safe,” the man says beneath the taped-up gash across his forehead.

“That will be too late!” Skye snaps, her patience quickly wearing out. “I don’t care what you think of SHIELD, but we don’t leave people behind!”

“You’re not in SHIELD right now,” Gordon reminds her unnecessarily. “You’re on our turf, and you’ll obey the laws of our land. I’m sorry.”

Skye balls her hands into fists, pressing down on an unexpected tremor, but then a honeyed voice drifts over her shoulder.

“Don’t give up hope just yet.”

Skye turns to see Raina approaching them, gold eyes glowing from beneath the hood of her cloak.

*Back in the daylight, Sonic?*

“Skye can save Lincoln,” Raina says, looking at Gordon. “I saw her do it.”

“You’ve seen it?” Skye repeats, raising an eyebrow and glancing at Gordon.

“We think Raina’s gift may allow her to see things before they happen,” Gordon explains, turning his head towards Raina. “Tell me what you saw.”

“What I saw doesn’t make much sense,” Raina admits, folding her hands in front of her. “Why would Coulson be working with Ward?”

Skye’s heart shudders. *I didn’t tell anyone I saw them together…*

“They are working together,” she says. “I saw them back there.”

Raina’s gold eyes widen. “Then you have to go, Raina says. “You do go.”

*Things have to happen the way they happen…*

“Go where?” Skye whispers.

*Please say it’s back to my team…*

“Lincoln’s in a dark room with two doctors,” Raina says, her eyes downcast like she’s recounting a memory. “They’re cutting into him. You find him. You’re the only one that can save him.”
Skye rounds on Gordon, staring intently at where his eyes should be. “You *have* to take me.”

But he still shakes his head. “Last time I went back for Lincoln, Hydra almost captured me. How would this be any different?”

Raina sounds smug as she answers. “Because where you take Skye is a long way from Hydra.”

Skye looks over at her, afraid to hope.

“My team?”

Raina’s mouth turns up in a ghost of a smile beneath the thorns. “Your home.”

Skye faces Gordon. “I’m about to give you some coordinates that you can never reveal to anyone.”

He teleports her right into the cabin of the Bus, docked in the hangar of the Playground. There is only time for a quick nod of gratitude before he disappears again, and then Skye strides out to the cargo stairs.

They’re all there, dressed for a mission, the ramp is closing, and May and Coulson both have their guns pointed at Ward.

“Hey guys,” Skye calls, stepping into view, and even though Coulson’s gun flies automatically to point at her, she feels nothing but relief at the sight of the Coulson, Jemma, Fitz, and May all standing in the Bus together, happy to see her and ready to do what they do best.

But of course, the sixth person spoils the moment.

“This is great,” Ward says, his hands still in the air as he grins around at them. “Finally got the team back together!”

**May:**

They don’t get a moment alone until well after takeoff.

The cockpit door is barely closed before May is pressing Skye back against it, kissing her soundly, a kiss Skye presses urgently back into, hands slipping into May’s hair and holding her close. It’s not a messy kiss, but it is frantic, and when they part, Skye immediately pulls May in again, wrapping her arms around her ribs and holding her in a sound embrace.

“*Jesus,*” Skye whispers over her shoulder, sounding breathless. “What has it been, a week? Feels like so much longer…

May leans back only so she can move her hands to grip Skye’s face, peering at her in the dim light.

“Are you okay?” she demands, and Skye nods quickly.

“Yeah. Are you okay?”

May manages a tight smile. “I’m fine. This is a month for the books, though.”

Skye smiles briefly before leaning in and kissing her once more, this time more tenderly.

“I was so worried about you,” May whispers when they part, and Skye nods, tipping her head until
her forehead bumps May’s still holding her close with an arm around her waist.

“I know,” she says apologetically. “I’m sorry I couldn’t reach you sooner.”

“Tell me everything,” May demands, and Skye nods.

They climb into the pilots’ seats together as the plane sails towards the polar night, and Skye takes a deep breath before telling her everything…or what feels like everything. The teleporter’s visit to the cabin on Christmas Day. May’s warning phone call barely preceding the arrival of Bobbi with a team. Calling for help and losing a couple of days to sleep and recovery, some process that healed all the broken places in her arms. A community somewhere in Asia full of enhanced or almost-enhanced people. Including Raina.

“There’s a woman there who offered to train me, to help me figure out how to control and use my gift,” Skye says, her story seeming to slow down suddenly. “She’s a pro, like she’s been doing this forever. And she probably has—she’s in charge of the community. She did more in one day than I’d figured out how to do in two weeks. And…well…she finally told me at the end of our first day training…” Skye takes a deep breath. “She’s my mother, May. I thought my mother was dead, but she’s alive…and my father was there too and it was this big, ridiculous family reunion, and it turns out I was born July 1988 so I guess I’m actually 26 now…”

May is still trying to process all of this, barely able to react to one thing at a time. Thankfully, Skye is still talking.

“It was so strange, May. Like, everything felt right and felt wrong at the same time. Like, they’re my parents, but they’re still strangers to me, and the community was nice but I was still the new kid in school—the only other friend I made there is the guy that Hydra took this afternoon, the guy that Jiaying—my mother—sent to keep an eye on me when I was with Cal…”

Skye suddenly falls silent, pulling in a couple of shaky breaths.

“I’m sorry. I know that was a lot.”

“It was,” May says, still trying to smooth over all the facts in her mind. “It was a lot for you. How are you handling it all?”

She doesn’t know what else to ask.

Skye sighs, scrubbing both hands down her face once. “I don’t know,” she says, pulling her legs up onto the seat, lowering her hands to wrap her arms around her calves. “I just…I can only think about one thing at a time. This guy—Lincoln—it’s my fault that he got taken—”

“That’s not your fault,” May says quickly, firmly. “Hydra did this. Coulson was on his own mission, and we had no idea Hydra would be there…”

“What the hell happened after I went to the Retreat?” Skye demands, finally facing her. “Why did Bobbi bring agents after me?”

So May fills her in on everything else—the assault on the base and the “Real SHIELD” showdown, getting locked up for getting Coulson out, Gonzales, Weaver, the Iliad, Fitz leaving with Coulson’s Toolbox, Gonzales offering her a place on the board…

“I took the spot and they gave me command of the base,” May finishes. “That was two days ago. They’ve kept us split up since then—Simmons stayed at the Playground, but they sent Trip to the Iliad. I don’t know the details of what Coulson and Hunter have done since they met up, but I know
they went to the Retreat looking for you and then were joined by Deathlok. At some point, Fitz must have found him with the Toolbox…”

“And Ward?” Skye says, the two words dripping with disdain. “What the hell is he doing here?”

May shakes her head. “Not a fucking clue.”

They fly in silence for a few moments, the night crowding in around the plane as they streak north over Canada, gradually leaving the lights of civilization behind.

“Are you and Coulson fighting?” Skye eventually asks, glancing over at May. “You seemed kind of tense.”

May sighs. “While he was gone, we uncovered a big project that he’s been funneling SHIELD money and resources into since nearly the day we got to the Playground. He kept that secret from everyone for months—and I wasn’t ready for it when Weaver and Bobbi threw it at my feet. He still won’t tell anyone what it’s about.”

“Didn’t you talk to him after he got back?” Skye asks, sounding concerned.

“I did,” May says grimly. “We didn’t get anywhere.”

“What about time-travel?” Skye asks in a low voice, even though May knows the intercom is off. “Couldn’t you have gone to the future and asked how this all pans out?”

A memory of a Skye with her hair cut off and tears in her eyes surfaces, and May shakes her head.

“I didn’t want to be away from the rest of our team if I could help it—there were too many other things to worry about.”

She wants the image of Future Skye out of her mind, so she goes back to something Skye had said a few minutes back.

“You said the woman—your mother—“ the words feel so strange coming out of her mouth, “she taught you how to control your powers. What can you do?”

Skye spends the next stretch of time detailing the things she now understands about her powers—sensing and amplifying vibrations of different kinds of matter—and all the things that means she can do. She tells May about causing an avalanche, finding objects without her eyes or her hands, making music without touching water…Too soon, however, they’re crossing the Arctic Circle.

“We’ll be inside the Hydra base’s radar range in the next twenty minutes,” May says, cutting Skye off in a break between stories. “You should go get ready. And get anything out of your bunk that you don’t want to lose.”

Skye nods soberly, unbuckling her seatbelt. “It’s the end of an era,” she murmurs, looking over at May.

“In so many ways,” May responds with a sad smile, looking over at Skye.

For a suspended moment, they hold each other’s gazes, and May feels all the chaos of the past week trying to crowd between them, all the things they’ve experienced separately suddenly too much in the small space together. Even as they sit there though, she remembers another night in this cockpit, Skye’s first birthday after May met her, when she had only barely started to change all of their worlds.
This can’t drive us apart, she thinks as she presses down again on that single snapshot of the future that she saw back before Christmas and pushes back against all the new things in the air between them. We’ll get through this. We’ll be okay.

Before she can change her mind, May reaches over and pulls Skye into a kiss, one nearly as desperate as the first one.

I won’t leave her, she swears in her mind, breaking the kiss and looking into the girl’s eyes.

“I love you,” she says firmly.

“I love you too,” Skye whispers, her hand lingering on May’s cheek. “Stay safe.”

Twenty-two minutes later, two missiles blast their Bus to pieces. May holds the quinjet’s controls in an iron grip and brings her team back to earth safely, one last time.

January 2-4, 2015

Skye:

Lincoln stayed stable for the entire flight back to the Playground, and Mike, though missing several of his cybernetic enhancements, was awake and in decent spirits for most of it.

“Glad to see you ditched your Hydra buddies,” he joked as Jemma tends his wounds while May guides the plane southward again. “This sure feels like a blast from the past, though.”

“Whatever happened to Ward and Bakshi?” Coulson demanded, gaze landing on Jemma, who refused to look up.

“Ward took off and Bakshi didn’t make it.”

When they get back to the Playground, Skye sticks by Lincoln’s side until he’s taken for CAT scans, and then she drifts back over to Simmons, who has just seen Mike off to the facility that will replace his leg.

“So can you all give me a rundown on the new kids?” Skye asks, glancing at all the new faces in the lab.

Jemma rolls her eyes, fingertips tapping on her computer a little more forcefully than necessary. “I’m afraid I wouldn’t know most of them. I already did my time making friends with strangers when I was undercover—it will be awhile before I’m ready to do it again. That’s Gonzales, though,” she says, nodding towards the hallway, where Skye sees a small man with gray hair and a mustache talking to Bobbi.

Bobbi…

“And that’s Agent 33—Kara Palamas,” Jemma continues, nodding towards the dark-haired young woman resting in the bed in the cubicle beside Lincoln’s. “You know, the girl who was wearing May’s face?”

“What’s she doing here?” Skye says, straightening up. “She was running with Hydra, last I checked.”
“Well, most recently, she’s been running with Ward,” Fitz grumbles, leaning tiredly on his elbows on the counter across from them. “Seems like she’s the reason four bullets didn't kill him back in Puerto Rico.”

“Thanks for that, by the way,” Jemma mutters, catching Skye’s eye with a wink.

“Agent Weaver—you remember her from the Science Academy?—and Agent Oliver are on the Iliad right now, along with half the agents from the Playground, including Trip,” Fitz adds. “I think they’re trying to mix us up so we get along better…or maybe just so we have a harder time conspiring under their noses.”

“But everyone’s okay with this?” Skye asks, glancing between them. “The two factions aren’t fighting anymore?”

“Fighting? No,” Jemma says, her tone still a casual simmer. “Agreeing? Also no.”

“Ah, I think you’d better—“ Fitz says, bumping Skye’s elbow and nodding towards the door, where May has suddenly appeared. She’s changed out of her tactical gear from the mission, but she also has a jacket in her hands like she’s about to walk out the door again.

Skye straightens quickly and rushes out into the hall.

“Where are you going?” she asks without prelude, stepping close to May.

“Coulson and I have to go to the Iliad,” May says, glancing over at Bobbi and Gonzales, a few meters down the hall. “Things are getting messy, and the board needs a face-to-face.”

“When will you be back?” Skye asks, brow furrowing.

“Not sure, but it shouldn’t be long,” May answers, wrapping one of Skye’s hands subtly in hers. “Mack will be in charge until we get back. And in the meantime, you might want to keep an eye on the news.”

For two days, the Avengers make headlines across the globe, and Skye spends most of her time at Lincoln’s bedside, not wanting him to wake up in a strange place alone. When he does wake up, it’s with the fanfare of flickering lights and fritzing electrical equipment.

“It’s all right, you’re safe!” Skye repeats until he settles, his eyes focusing on hers. He calms, even cracks a smile, until he sees the SHIELD logo on the wall beside them.

“Skye…what are we doing here?”

He’s angry that she came after him. Scared that Afterlife is now at risk of a SHIELD attack. But even with his frustration thickening the air between them, Skye still knows she may be the only friend he has here, so she stays by his side through his check-ups and meals, listening to Jemma’s recommendation of at least another day of bedrest before attempting to get up and move around.

“You need to let me go back,” he insists, looking to Skye for backup.

“You died the day before yesterday, Lincoln,” she reminds him, remembering the way she restarted his heart and shaking her head. “I promise, we’ll get you back to Afterlife as soon as it’s safe for you to travel.”

That evening, Jemma brings Skye a phone.
“Skye, I heard your friend is awake?” Coulson says on the other side without introduction.

“Yeah,” Skye says, glancing through the paneled walls at Lincoln’s anxious face. “He’s pretty weak, but he’s going to be okay.”

“Glad to hear it,” Coulson says, sounding preoccupied. “May and I are on our way back now. And when we get there, we need to talk about a few things. Can you ask this guy if he’s ever heard about a rock that can turn into liquid?”

They’re back by evening, and Skye meets with May and Coulson in his office.

“I’ve never heard of this rock, and neither has Lincoln,” she answers after they recap the story of Raina and Gordon both being spotted on the Iliad, apparently after a big rock that is kept in the cargo levels.

“And you believe him?” Coulson asks, a question that catches Skye by surprise.

“Why wouldn’t I?”

“You barely know him,” he reminds her. “You told us you just met him a week ago.”

“I know enough,” Skye says, prickling slightly and glancing at May for backup. “Jiaying and Lincoln helped me learn to control my powers so that I wasn’t hurting myself. They’re good people.”

“Are they?” Coulson presses, holding her gaze. “People? You said this is an entire community of enhanced individuals, but we don’t even know what to call them.”

“Call them Inhumans,” Skye answers, closing her eyes tiredly. “It’s what our ancient ancestors called themselves. And we—they—just want to be left alone.”

Behind her closed eyes, the pause is very loud.

“We?” Coulson finally repeats. Skye opens her eyes, pursing her lips and glancing at May.

“They want to be left alone, and I want SHIELD to leave them alone. That’s the long and short of it.”

“If they want to be left alone, then why infiltrate a military vessel?” May finally says, her face giving no hint to anything except worry.

“You’re assuming that this rock a weapon, but it’s in SHIELD’s possession,” Skye reminds them both. “Maybe they’re just afraid of it—afraid of what Gonzales might do with it!”

“We’re not the enemy here,” Coulson says quickly, rising to his feet.

“This man teleported on board, Skye,” May adds, her voice a little heavier. “He brought you right into the Bus. If he can come and go anywhere at will, he’s clearly very dangerous!”

“Well the same could be said about me!” Skye snaps, throwing up her hands. “I skewered a guy by shattering a thirty-foot tree on accident. When I finally let my powers loose out at Afterlife, I pulled an avalanche off a mountainside. I could potentially bring this base down if I tried.” She pauses, checking her volume and taking a deep breath before meeting both their eyes in turn. “But with the skill sets SHIELD taught you, you’re both dangerous too. So is Mike. And Lincoln. But you trust us—you saved us because it’s what you do. It’s what I’m trying to do here. These people just want to be left alone. What good would pursuing this come to?”
Coulson looks at her steadily for a long moment before exhaling and speaking very slowly.

“What do you know about their intentions, Skye? Are they planning to stay in hiding for all time? Can you tell me with 100% confidence that you do not believe anyone at Afterlife is a threat to the outside world?”

Images of Cal, Raina, Gordon, even Jiaying flash through her mind.

She hesitates just long enough.

“That’s why I’m not dropping this, Skye,” Coulson says, holding her gaze. “Because I can tell that you’re not too sure about them either. I don’t want this to escalate because of mistrust or fear. So I am going to propose a sit-down with this community’s leader.”

“Jiaying,” Skye says without thinking. “That…doesn’t sound like a good idea.”

“And that’s because?”

Skye glances once at May, who shrugs almost imperceptibly. She takes a deep breath.

“Because she’s my mother.”

There’s a long pause, and Skye really doesn’t want to talk about this now, so she hurries into the only alternative she can come up with.

“Let me go first. With Lincoln. Let me be an agent and do the necessary recon, and then I can advise you all about what to do next,” she offers.

Coulson and May share a look, their silent communication that Skye is still jealous of, and then Coulson faces her again with a nod.

“You know how this works Skye. We need to find out how many people we’re dealing with, assess their powers, and place them on the Index. You can tell that to whoever needs to know about it and try to persuade them ahead of time.”

She nods, a cold feeling gripping her stomach. “I understand. But to be honest, I doubt they’ll agree to it.”

Coulson nods grimly. “Step one is to try. We don’t want this to escalate any more than you do.”

Uninvited, Jiaying’s voice slips through her mind.

“Things tend to get messy when our two worlds meet.”

“Things get messy when SHIELD gets involved with Inhumans,” she says softly, glancing at May, whose brow furrows slightly. She can’t bring herself to say the name, the place—it would hurt May too much—but maybe May will put the pieces together on her own.

“Our organization has a mission, Skye,” Coulson says, seeming oblivious to the message Skye was hoping to hint at. “And if you’re still with us, then we need you to help.”

She nods, suddenly needing to be out of this room, done with this talk.

“I’ll tell Lincoln. We’ll go back together and talk to Jiaying.”

She takes a few steps towards the door, but May’s voice behind her delivers a final warning.
“It’s not easy to stand on both sides of this, Skye.”

Her tone seems to echo, and Skye doesn’t let herself look back, afraid to see the hurt in May’s eyes if it’s there. She just takes a deep breath and opens the door to walk away.

“I know.”

May:

Coulson finds her in the hangar later that night, a gaping, useless space, now that it’s missing a plane.

“It’s the end of an era,” she mutters as he comes to stand beside her, looking at the place where their Bus should have been.

Coulson sighs, hanging his hands in his pants pockets. “Think you’ll miss it?”

May shrugs internally. “I have the unfortunate optimism of occasionally believing that our team is finally out of the woods. I’ve always been wrong.”

There’s a moment of silence before Coulson turns towards her. “I thought maybe now would be a good time to apologize at length—”

“There’s no need.”

“May.”

“Coulson. We don’t owe each other anything. You did your job and saved lives. End of story.”

She doesn’t want to leave it like this, but she is also sure that she doesn’t want to keep fighting. She doesn’t have it in her. Still, he lingers, and she feels his gaze even as she avoids meeting it.

“Are you and Skye okay?” he eventually asks, a question that finally makes May turn towards him.

“You know, none of this would have happened if we hadn’t gone in that city in San Juan.” He looks a little startled by the accusation, and May explains. “Remember what Sif said about currents in the universe that we can’t swim against? I can’t help feeling like this was always supposed to happen. We brought Skye to SHIELD—practically walked her in by the hand a year and a half ago—then last month, you took her to that city where she transformed. Now, it turns out her parents lead the people like her who have been hiding for years. How is this all coincidence?”

She sees Phil attempting a neutral expression, but she knows he understands when he refuses to acknowledge the seriousness. “Well, I guess if we can blame anyone, we can blame Fury—he put the GH in me that started this whole mess.”

May attempts a smirk, grateful to feel the air lightening between them. “I blame you for getting yourself stabbed by an Asgardian.”

He smiles, and she feels the tension unraveling further. “Just doing my job.”

They stand for a moment in silence in the space where the familiar has been replaced with the unknown, and May finally feels unafraid to voice the question that’s been haunting her since before Christmas, since her last trip to the future.

“Phil, what if there really are tides we can’t swim against? What if there really is a fate coming that
we can’t stop?”

This time she doesn’t try to stop the image of a future Skye with short hair from drifting up in her mind.

“How could you do this? How could you do that, and then leave?”

Phil looks concerned, his brows pinching together. “I thought you knew all about that—that things only happen the way they happen?”

May purses her lips, looking again at the empty space where their Bus used to be.

“I just…I’ve never wanted so badly to be wrong.”

January 5, 2015

Skye:

Even after he’s mobile, they have to wait until Jemma finishes Indexing Lincoln before they are allowed to leave. Coulson meets them out in the hallway after Jemma finally gives them the okay, walking with them towards the hangar doors. Lincoln still seems plenty sour about the whole situation, but Coulson is patient.

“I know you’ve been through a lot, but you can trust us. You’ll see.”

They reach the hangar doors, and her director turns to face her.

“So how does this work? You just click your heels together and whisper ‘there’s no place like home’?”

Skye shrugs, glancing at Lincoln. “Sort of, actually. Gordon can sense us…it’s this thing called quantum entanglement, so…yeah he’ll find us. As long as we’re nowhere near any of you guys,” she finishes, glancing around at the halls that she’s so glad to be seeing again.

Coulson nods, reaching out and patting her shoulder. “Okay then. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Skye tries to smile before she walks away.

May is in the hangar when they get through the doors. She holds out a set of keys and nods at the cover car that’s been designated for their trip out of base.

“Stay off the main roads,” she reminds Skye unnecessarily. “Keep an eye out for tails.”

“Got it,” Skye says, wrapping her in a quick hug, one that May returns with a little less force than their last one. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

She doesn’t kiss May, mostly because of Lincoln standing right behind them, but she wonders if the sentiment is obvious anyway.

“Be safe,” May orders when Skye pulls away.

Skye smiles, stepping back and picking up her bag. “I love you too.”

They’re about a mile down the road before Lincoln speaks.
“You said these people are like your family,” he says without looking at her. “And I get that. I can see it. But what if things go badly when everyone gets together? Whose side are you going to be on?”

“The side that’s saving lives,” Skye says firmly.

“Whose lives?” he asks quietly, looking over at her.

Skye bites her lip and says nothing.

She pulls the car off the road, activating a tracker so that someone can pick it up later, and finally looks expectantly over at Lincoln. He stares at her for a long moment before turning away and speaking.

“Gordon, we’re safe,” he says tiredly.

There’s a familiar sound of quantum fields opening a portal, and Skye yelps in surprise as Gordon suddenly appears in the backseat of their car.

“You guys are a pain in my ass,” the teleporter grumbles, leaning over the seatback and grabbing both of their shoulders.

The world turns over, and they’re gone.

Chapter End Notes

I REALLY don't plan to take another month to get the finale up, but no encouragement in the comments is ever wasted! See you on the other side...
Fractures

Chapter Notes

Yeah, this month was draining and these chapters were painful, so...sorry not sorry for taking my time finishing them. 49 came in at over 14000 words (should've seen that coming...), so I split it. I'll be posting 50 momentarily.

January 5-7, 2015—Skye is 26, May is 45

They appear back at Afterlife, and Skye’s equilibrium is still trying to balance itself when she looks up to see Jiaying hurrying towards them. Her mother approaches with her arms outstretched, and Skye hugs her automatically, still hardly able to believe that this is even possible.

“Are you all right?” Jiaying asks over her shoulder, and Skye nods as she pulls back. “What happened?” her mother demands next, looking at Lincoln, who is still sporting a few visible healing abrasions.

“A lot,” he says dryly. “But I’m okay.”

“Doctors at SHIELD patched him up,” Skye offers, and Jiaying looks startled as she faces her again.

“SHIELD?” she repeats in a horrified tone, glancing between Skye and Lincoln.

Skye nods and takes a deep breath.

Time to be an agent first.

“We need to talk.”

Jiaying makes her wait until they get alone behind closed doors again, in a room that seems to be something like an office. Her mother sits down behind a thin desk, but Skye makes herself keep standing formally, like a client before a boss. She is, after all, making an offer.

Jiaying listens quietly as Skye tells her about the mission to the Arctic, explaining how Raina had convinced Gordon that Skye had to go back and be there to save Lincoln’s life.

“I had to restart his heart, Mom,” Skye says, feeling sick as she remembers finding Lincoln without a heartbeat, half-opened on an operating table. “I wasn’t sure what to do, but I put my hands over his heart like CPR and tried to get his heart moving again…and somehow it worked.” She smiles hesitantly, and when she sees a glow of pride in her mother’s eyes, she grins wider.

She explains getting Lincoln and Mike back to SHIELD, staying with Lincoln through his recovery, and meeting with her leaders.

“They said Gordon and Raina were seen inside a SHIELD ship,” Skye finally says, looking at Jiaying quizzically. “What was that about? Apparently, they were after a big rock that’s down in the cargo levels?”

Jiaying looks away with a small shake of her head. “That’s a terribly long story, I’m afraid,” she says.
with a sigh. “Raina saw it in a vision, and they went to confirm its existence.”

“But why?” Skye presses. “Why is it important to you all?”

“You don’t need to worry about that,” Jiaying says, waving her hand dismissively as she looks up at Skye again. “I have a feeling you have other SHIELD-related news for us, though.”

Skye nods, biting her lip. “Yeah. SHIELD probably would have left all of us alone before that happened, but once Gordon appeared on the ship, everyone got spooked. Now, they want to at the very least Index any enhanced people at Afterlife. That just means getting them on a list—knowing what they can do and nothing more.” She stares at her mother, watching her reaction carefully, but for a long time, Jiaying’s face is just blank.

“We don’t have to leave this place,” Skye goes on, trying to sound reassuring. “And SHIELD doesn’t want that either. Nothing has to change.”

Finally, her mother’s expression shifts, her lips pulling into a sad smile as she looks up at Skye. “Sometimes I forget how young you are,” Jiaying says, a tone that’s not quite condescending but strikes an uneasy chord in Skye’s chest.

“Please, just sit down with them,” she says, holding her mother’s gaze. “Coulson’s a good man, and he’s like family to me. He wouldn’t hurt me, or anyone I care about.”

Jiaying is looking away now, and Skye wonders if she maybe shouldn’t have called Coulson family in front of her mother. Quickly trying to balance the feelings, she pulls out the chair on the other side of the desk, sitting down and hunching forward, trying to catch her mother’s gaze.

“Yes,” she finally says, sighing a little. “I suppose our people will need to meet SHIELD sooner or later, and I’d rather forego the suspense.”
“Thank you, Mom,” Skye says, squeezing Jiaying’s hand again. “This is the right thing to do. These are good people. You’ll see.”

Jiaying smiles once, then pulls her hand out of Skye’s to reach for one of her desk drawers, from which she pulls out Skye’s phone. Skye reaches for it eagerly, but she hesitates to turn it on, remembering what happened the last time they both touched this device.

And it seems that her mother hasn’t forgotten, either.

“Your friend—the one you’re not telling me about?” she says coolly, and Skye looks at her even though she wants to look away. Jiaying’s expression betrays nothing, but Skye still feels unsettled. “Raina told me that this woman was in the Kree temple with the two of you when you both transformed, but then she disappeared before Raina saw what happened to her. Yesterday, she mentioned seeing the same woman on the ship, appearing as before.”

Skye forces herself to only blink, unwilling to lie, unable to come up with an explanation.

“If she comes with the SHIELD committee to Afterlife,” Jiaying goes on, “you should let our doctors have a look at her. It would be interesting to know if the crystals changed her at all, even if it’s not on the outside. Perhaps she has a place here too.”

*She’s not mention* *ing Bahrain; maybe you had it wrong*, Skye thinks, clutching the phone in a tight grip on her lap and trying to formulate a response.

But nothing about this feels right, so Skye forces herself to stand, to not tremble, to nod once and turn away.

“Maybe so,” she says in a voice that doesn’t betray her by quivering. She marches steadily towards the door, pulls it open and steps out into the sunshine.

*May can’t come here. Jiaying can’t see her. Whatever Jiaying thinks of her, it’s obviously not good.*

But as she hurries away from Jiaying’s office and powers on her phone again, she is reminded that it’s useless—there’s no service or internet. Even the satellite function is unable to connect.

*Don’t come to Afterlife*, she types in a message to May, but the same red dot reminds her that she might as well be sending smoke signals.

**Please. Just stay away—I’ll explain everything when I can.**

Red dot. *Unable to send.*

Skye looks up, sighing in frustration loudly enough that a young woman with red hair sitting a few meters away glances up from her book, making a puzzled face in Skye’s direction. Suddenly self-conscious, Skye shoves the phone into her pocket and heads back towards her cabin, working through her breathing exercises and trying to calm herself down.

*This will be okay—you’ve seen May older than she is today—she’ll live through this, no matter what happens…*

But she can’t keep the feelings of dread at bay, not for her entire walk through the small village that was almost starting to feel like a home she could get used to. She reaches her cabin and stomps through the door, barely noticing the same redhead sitting across the plaza, a different book held in her hands.
January 6, 2015

May:

It takes another day to get the Board consolidated again, this time at the Playground. Mack and Trip are left in charge of the Iliad while Bobbi, Weaver, Gonzales, and Oliver fly in, eventually gathering in Coulson’s office close to noon that day. It means Coulson has had enough time to put together his plan for the meeting at Afterlife, which has most of the board descending on the place together with limited firepower.

Just a couple of quinjets for transport and a sidearm per agent. Standard.

“I’ll go in first, alone, unarmed,” Coulson is saying when another agent finally interrupts.

“You shouldn’t be the one going in,” Gonzales says quietly, just loud enough to be heard.

Coulson turns from the satellite feed on the wall to face the older man.

“Care to elaborate?”

“You’re too close to this,” Gonzales continues calmly. “Skye’s like a daughter to you. And everyone knows what she is to you,” he says with a brief but meaningful glance at May.

She doesn’t let her face show it, but she smirks internally.

Oh, you don’t know the half of it…

“I’m banking on that connection to get everyone through this safely,” Coulson explains, ignoring Gonzales’s last comment.

“You shouldn’t be,” Gonzales says, shaking his head. “This is one of the greatest threats SHIELD has ever faced—a whole race of people with powers. And you’ve proven time and again that you’re not objective when it comes to Skye.”

Coulson looks her way, but May continues to stare at the ground until he speaks.

“May? You’re awfully quiet.”

She glances around at the assembled agents.

You’re not here to take his side—you’re here to keep everyone safe.

She looks Coulson in the eye as she answers.

“Gonzales should go.”

She half-expects him to protest, but her friend finally nods.

“Okay then,” he says, his eyes sweeping around the circle. “I asked you to stay and give me advice—I’d be a fool not to take it. As Director, I’ll quarterback the mission from here. Gonzales and Weaver—you’re on QJ36. Let’s get assembled.”

An hour later, May is in the pilot’s seat with Simmons strapped in with the other agents in the space behind her when Coulson comes in on their monitor feed.
“Planes in the air,” he orders. “Coordinates are locked in. You’re headed for Asia, so get comfortable. It’s going to be a long flight.”

January 7, 2015

Skye:

She doesn’t see much of Lincoln for the time following returning to Afterlife, and she doesn’t glimpse Cal again until Gordon appears at her door to tell Skye that Jiaying wants her to come to the office. She follows him to the same room that she had met with Jiaying in before, glimpsing a flash of red hair in her periphery on the walk there.

She knows she’s not imagining it—the woman has been following her since she got back to Afterlife. The only reason Skye didn’t confront her at breakfast was because she didn’t want to give Jiaying one more reason to be suspicious of her.

Cal is waiting in the office when Skye and Gordon arrive, and so is the woman with red hair. Skye stops short, glancing over her shoulder at the path she and Gordon just came down.

How could she…

“Come in and shut the door, Daisy,” Cal calls, and she obeys, ducking into the dim room.

“This is Alisha,” Jiaying says with a nod at the redhead, seeming to have noticed the way Skye’s eyes are fixed on the unfamiliar woman. “She’s one of us.”

“As in, Inhuman?” Skye clarifies, still staring at the redhead, and the girl meets her eyes, nodding coolly.

“Quite.”

Could explain how she seems to be in two places at once…

“Your friends from SHIELD are on the way in,” Gordon announces, drawing both their attention. “We expect them to be here by midday.”

“How do you know that?” Skye asks, brow furrowing. “You have air traffic control somewhere around here?”

No one answers her question.

“Before they arrive, I wanted to let you know of a few decisions that have been made,” Jiaying says, meeting Skye’s eyes solemnly.

“Raina had another vision yesterday,” Gordon says from over her mother’s shoulder. “She said that she saw SHIELD jets firing on us, and Afterlife in flames.”

“They wouldn’t,” Skye interrupts quickly. “That can’t be true. SHIELD isn’t coming here for a fight—they just want to negotiate.”

“It does seem unlikely,” Gordon agrees, “especially since Raina insisted that the reason it would all happen was because Jiaying would be the one meeting with them. She then insisted that she be the one to act as liaison.”
“Raina?” Skye repeats. “Raina wants to step in and represent Afterlife to SHIELD?”

“I knew it was only a matter of time before she made a grab like this,” Cal grumbles through gritted teeth, and Jiaying puts a silencing hand on his arm.

“We might have trusted Raina’s vision if it hadn’t been such a thinly-veiled attempt to manipulate herself into a place of power,” she says, glancing between Gordon and Skye, “but now we have little incentive to trust her with anything. In a moment, we’ll be going over to confront her and make sure that she stays out of the middle of things when SHIELD arrives. Also, you should know, Skye, that we’ll also be handing your father over to SHIELD as a sign of goodwill.”

Startled, Skye looks over at Cal, but this doesn’t seem to be news to him.

“I volunteered,” he says solemnly, face grim. “It might mean that I get locked up, but it should convince SHIELD to have a little mercy, at least.”

“Cal,” Skye says, taking a small step towards him, “you don’t have to do this—“

“It’s been decided,” Jiaying cuts her off, gaze stern. “This is what’s going to happen. We just wanted you to know ahead of time.”

Gordon opens the door, and Jiaying moves towards it with Alisha on her heels.

“If you all want a moment alone, now’s the time,” Gordon says as the three of them step out into the sun. “Otherwise, we’re going to deal with Raina.”

Her mother doesn’t look back, but given that her other option is remaining alone with Cal, Skye follows her quickly, leaving him standing alone in the office.

She’s not sure what she would even say if she stayed.

Raina is vehement when they arrive, swearing up and down that her vision was the truth.

“I’m trying to save us!” she insists, her gold eyes flashing, thorned hands balled into fists.

“There’s not a single soul who knows you that trusts you, Raina,” Jiaying says calmly, and Skye almost feels bad for the small woman when she sees the hurt those words bring to her eyes.

Well, that’s no one’s fault but hers.

Jiaying turns to Alisha. “Keep her here until SHIELD is gone,” her mother orders, then glances back at Raina. “And then we’ll decide your fate.”

“You have to believe me!” Raina scrambles as Jiaying and Gordon turn to go, and Skye brushes past Alisha on her way out. “Something terrible is going to happen unless you do what I say! You’ll regret this!”

But Jiaying doesn’t look back as Alisha closes the door behind them, so Skye doesn’t either.

May:

The peaks are beautiful as they sail over the mountains of the Yunnan province towards the teleporter’s last known location. A small collection of wooden structures eventually comes into sight at the edge of a valley, and May leads the three jets in a wide circle around it, touching down on a
flat space less than a kilometer from the village.

As the agents unbuckle and move towards the rear ramp, May presses through the group of agents until she’s by Gonzales’s side as the ramp of her jet begins to lower.

“No bullets,” she mutters. “Give the order.”

*No more accidental power blasts.*

*No more Inhuman casualties at the hands of SHIELD.*

Gonzales doesn’t glance at her.

“I appreciate your concern, Agent May,” he mutters. “But I’ve lost enough SHIELD agents.”

It’s too late to press further though, because the ramp has lowered enough that May can see the teleporter waiting at the edge of the clearing. Gonzales strides out, as brave as one can seem with a cane and limp, and May takes a deep breath and follows.

“You’ve arrived,” the eyeless man says with a nod, sounding less than pleased by the fact as three planes of agents file out. “I’m here to escort you all to our leader. Which one of you is Agent Coulson?”

“I’ll be representing SHIELD in the Director’s place,” Gonzales says, stepping to the front, and the man nods expressionlessly.

“Follow me,” he says, turning and moving off up an unpaved path at a quick pace.

Weaver grips Gonzales’s arm and helps him hurry after him, and May fills in the space between, striding after the Inhuman up the slope towards the little village.

She sees the teleporter look back at her once, studying her without eyes, but she doesn’t let herself stare back.

**Skye:**

Skye is standing in Jiaying’s office with both of her parents when Gordon opens the door and Gonzales walks in.

“Where’s Coulson?” The question flies out of her mouth without thought.

*What the hell are you doing here?*

“At headquarters,” the elderly man answers calmly. “But I represent SHIELD with the same intentions. I might ask why he’s here though.” His gaze is on Cal.

Jiaying takes charge.

“You returned Lincoln and Skye to us,” she says, not even standing to shake Gonzales’s hand. “We’d like to return someone of interest to you. He’s killed agents of yours, hasn’t he?”

Cal glances at her, surprised. “Oh no, not SHIELD agents… I don’t think. No, just people who had it coming.”
Skye bites the inside of her lip and forces her face not to show her disgust.

_Villages and villages, I heard_…

“We pride ourselves on doing the right thing,” Jiaying says, taking control of the conversation again, “and as much as this pains me, I do understand the larger goal.”

Gonzales seems a little nonplussed, but he nods. “I’ll call one of my people to take him,” he says, half-turning towards the door.

“Skye can,” her mother says suddenly, and the woman turns towards her. “Would you take your father to the agents outside? I’m sure Robert and I have much to discuss.”

She doesn’t want to leave her mother alone with the man who sent agents after her back on Christmas day, but Skye also doesn’t trust Cal with anyone else. Gordon is still standing sentry by Jiaying’s door when she walks out, and Skye almost stumbles as she sees May standing with the knot of agents in the pavilion below.

_Don’t let Jiaying see her_, she reminds herself, reaching behind Cal and quickly shutting the door.

She tries to hurry Cal along, but he drags his feet, turning towards her as they walk.

“You know, I was always excited to meet you,” he says as they walk between buildings on the path towards the lower plaza, “even when you were a little bit of nothing in your mother’s belly.”

Skye glances over at him and attempts to smile, spotting a blur of red in her periphery.

_Alisha._

“I had all these ideas in my head as to what kind of woman you’d turn out to be,” Cal goes on, stopping on the path and smiling at Skye. His expression is the softest she’s ever seen, barely tinged with the haunting mania she’s so used to seeing in everything he does. He looks, for the first time, like a normal guy. Like someone’s doctor.

Or someone’s dad.

“You really are magnificent,” her father says, smiling softly at her. “I’m very grateful I got a chance to know you.”

“I’m glad I got to know you too,” Skye whispers, and it doesn’t feel like a lie as it floats off her tongue. She can’t quite make herself offer him a hug, but the look he gives her feels like something far gentler than they’ve ever shared. It only seems right to turn away and end it all on a high note.

May is standing with a small cluster of agents who are built and dressed like Specialists, but Skye doesn’t recognize any of them. They all turn as Skye approaches with Cal beside her, and though the other agents rest their hands on their sidearms, Skye only sees May’s hand twitch in the same direction. She looks at Skye with a question in her eyes, so Skye speaks first as they get close enough.

“Jiaying is turning Cal over to SHIELD,” she announces, reaching over and putting one hand on her father’s elbow. “You can secure him and take him to one of the jets now.”

May looks surprised for a second, but she quickly corrects herself.

“Agents Jordan and O’Reilly,” she orders with a jerk of her head in Cal’s direction, and as they
move in, Skye spots a red-headed woman in the distance.

*Why is she following me? Did Jiaying tell her—*

*Shit. Don’t let her see May…*

Not wanting to believe the worst but unwilling to risk being wrong, Skye catches May’s arm and tugs her around the corner of the nearest building, hopefully out of the other Inhuman’s sight.

“What happened to Coulson?” she demands. “Did they do something to him? Why is Gonzales here and not him?”

“We all thought it was best to have someone more objective to go in and meet with your mother,” May answers calmly, and Skye can tell she’s all Agent right now.

“Gonzales sent agents to kill me a couple of weeks ago!” she reminds May in a harsh whisper, glancing around for Alisha again.

They still seem to be alone, for the moment.

“No to kill you,” May corrects, “to bring you in. Gonzales is a better man than you think.”

*Right. The Board. Majority rules.*

Skye does another periphery sweep again and this time spots Alisha a dozen meters away, watching from the shadows of one of the dwellings.

“You should go with them to take Cal to the plane,” Skye says quickly, giving May a subtle push on the elbow and steering her back around the corner to the other agents. “Radio base and tell Coulson he’ll be coming in with you all.”

She feels May looking at her strangely, and Skye can’t quite bring herself to meet her gaze until she feels May’s hand barely brush hers as she moves ahead of Skye.

“I hope your mother is everything you wanted her to be,” May says quietly before she’s too far away, and Skye makes herself not follow.

No need to give Alisha anything to tell Jiaying.

She watches May and the other guards until they’re out of sight, then turns and scans the area again with the pretext of seeing who else has joined the party. Alisha is still watching her from the space between buildings, but she also notices Lincoln finally out in the daylight…and he’s talking to Jemma.

*What’s she doing here?*

“You should be able to reassure them, shouldn’t you?” she hears Jemma saying as she approaches. “It’s all a rather simple process, you remember.”

*Oh. Probably talking about Indexing the residents of Afterlife…*

Lincoln makes eye contact with Skye over Jemma’s shoulder, and the scientist soon turns, smiling at Skye as she gets closer.

“There you are!” she says brightly, reaching over and catching Skye’s hand in hers when she gets close enough.
"I didn’t know you were coming too," Skye murmurs, squeezing her hand once.

“Well, Coulson sent me along to help with Indexing. He said that if the leaders agreed, then we could try to finish everything today, let this be a singular visit and not overstay our welcome.” Jemma smiles a little, looking around at the plaza. “This is such a beautiful place, Skye! I understand now why you like it here. It’s so peaceful.”

In the distance, two gunshots suddenly shatter the quiet, and Skye feels her heart stutter in her chest.

Mom.

She drops Jemma’s hand and bolts towards Jiaying’s building. Lincoln nearly overtakes her as they run, and by the time they round the final corner, Jiaying is staggering out into the sunlight, one hand pressed against her shoulder, where blood is flowing freely.

“Mom!” Skye shouts, racing up just as her mother falls to her knees. Skye catches Jiaying in her arms, replacing her hand with her own and frantically trying to remember her field medicine training.

Find entry and exit sites, apply pressure, elevate...

“Gonzales said that Inhumans should be exterminated,” her mother is gasping, face pinched in pain. Skye hears a murmur ripple through the air and glances up to see that a crowd of residents has already gathered around them, including Jemma. “He had a gun…”

Skye looks frantically at Lincoln, who moves over to take her place as Skye starts to stand, ready to quake down the building if it will bring Gonzales crawling out to face the gauntlet, but Jiaying’s grip turns strong on her arm.

“No, stay with me, please,” her mother says, begging with her eyes before turning her gaze on Lincoln.

“Get everyone to safety,” she orders, and he stands quickly.

“Everyone, this way!”

The crowd disperses, and Skye looks at Jemma.

“Go tell May,” she whispers, hoping that Jiaying doesn’t know who that name refers to.

Jemma looks on the verge of tears but nods immediately, racing away, and Skye bites her lip as she watches her go.

This isn’t how I wanted them to meet my mother...

She looks down at her mom, pressing harder on the wound.

She heals, Skye reminds herself, glancing at the scars on her mother’s face. But Jiaying’s eyes are already drooping, so Skye shakes her, somewhat roughly.

“Stay awake, Mom,” she urges, leaning close and speaking loud. “Don’t fall asleep!”

Someone else was there to do this for me, twelve years and a lifetime ago...

A couple of long minutes later, Lincoln comes racing back up.

“Let’s get her to the doctors,” he says, getting beneath Jiaying’s other shoulder and helping her to her
feet. Skye follows, supporting her other side, but she suddenly becomes aware of the whistling roar of a quinjet lifting up, coming closer…

She barely has a chance to glance back before the first missile flies.

Her ears are still ringing when she sits up, and the building Jiaying had just exited is in flames. Dust and debris shake off her body as Skye presses up onto her knees and watches the quinjet streak away into the sky.

Who...why...

Alisha is suddenly there, taking Skye’s place and helping Jiaying to her feet.

“Why would you let them do this to us?” her mother demands as she turns away. “I thought you were on our side!”

“I am!” Skye stammers. “I don’t know what’s happening this wasn’t…”

“Skye!”

She hears May’s voice carry through the chaos, the sound of familiar footsteps racing closer.

They can’t see each other.

She takes off in the other direction, rounding a bend in the path and abruptly coming face-to-face with May.

“May! Get out of here!” she shouts, holding out both hands and blocking the path. “You need to take all the agents and get out!”

May stops short a couple of meters from her, visibly confused, but quickly restarts, striding forward determinedly.

“I need to find Gonzales,” she insists. “We have to know what happened.”

“He shot my mother!” Skye cries, barely believing that this is up for discussion.

May looks distraught, but Skye sees her gritting her teeth. “If that’s what happened, then he’ll pay for it,” her S.O. says firmly. “But where is he? We can fix this.”

She starts to move up the path again, and Skye backs up in front of her as a movement over May’s shoulder draws Skye’s gaze.

Alisha. A few meters away. Probably close enough to hear what they’re saying.

“It’s too late to fix this,” Skye says solidly. “Now take your men, and get the hell out of here.”

Something flickers in May’s eyes, but Skye sees it disappear almost immediately.

“Not until I find Gonzales,” she responds solidly.

All business right now.

Fine.

May attempts to stride past her again, and Skye seizes her arm, glancing back at Alisha. The woman
is hovering on the path, as if waiting to see if Skye needs her help, and Skye realizes with a nauseating clench in her gut that she’s going to have to make this look convincing.

*This is going to be awful.*

May throws off her arm, and Skye raises her fists. May looks more confused than angry, and she almost lazily blocks Skye’s first two attempts at punches, then the third, then the fourth. On the fifth one, she grabs Skye’s arm and twists it up until her arm is barred across Skye’s throat.

“What are you *doing*?” May demands over her shoulder, their bodies pressed together. “Stop wasting time, Skye! Help me fix this!”

Skye’s eyes find Alisha, now rushing forward to help, and Skye summons her strength to twist out of May’s hold. She can barely look at her as she says the words.

“I’m sorry May, you’re not welcome here.”

She raises one hand and attempts to send a small, disorienting pulse of air towards May, just enough to knock her down, knock her back.

She miscalculates. Horribly.

May goes flying off her feet, landing several meters away on the stone pavement without breaking her fall. She doesn’t move, and Skye suddenly feels sick.

“Are you okay?” Alisha calls as she hurries around May until she’s within arm’s reach, and Skye nods.

“I’m fine,” she husks out.

May, I’m so sorry…

Just then Jemma races around the corner at the end of the path. Her eyes fly to May, to Skye, to Alisha, and Skye quickly rushes towards her.

“Jemma! You’ve gotta get May out of here,” Skye gasps as she races up, but she doesn’t miss how Jemma’s body tenses, her hands automatically raise defensively…

*She’s afraid of you.* Skye realizes, halting immediately. The sick feeling grips her stomach tighter, but there isn’t time to fix this.

*She’s afraid. Good. They’ll leave before anyone else gets hurt*

“Jemma I’m sorry, there’s no time to explain, but I need you to get May out of here. Do *not* let Jiaying or Gordon see her,” she backs away, doing her best to tell the truth with her eyes even as she collides with Alisha and gives her a shove, pushing her away from Jemma and May. “I’m sorry, Jemma. Just tell everyone I’m sorry.”

*May:*

Her head is pounding and her eardrums ache with unpopped pressure when she wakes up to the sound of a man singing.

The quinjet is packed with agents, the engines whining with high-speed flight, and she’s laid out on a
stretcher on the floor. Over her shoulder, a cuffed and shackled Cal is humming to a tune in his headphones, and all the other agents look shaken and confused.

“Jemma, do we have confirmation on who fired the missile?” Coulson is asking from a split screen with Weaver video monitor near the cockpit, where Simmons is reporting in.

“No sir, we’re still sorting out what happened with that quinjet,” Simmons says as May staggers to her feet, the headache surging painfully as she does. “Our priority was to get all SHIELD personnel out safely.”

“Where’s Skye?” May demands to everyone who can hear as she pulls herself together and marches towards the monitor.

“How are you feeling?” Simmons asks instead of answering, looking over at May with her brow pinched with worry.

“I have a headache and I asked a question,” May snaps back, glancing towards Coulson on the monitor.

“She stayed at Afterlife. She said to tell everyone she’s sorry.”

Weaver, Coulson, and Simmons bicker back and forth, but May barely hears it.

*I’m sorry May, you’re not welcome here.*

*May, you’re not welcome here.*

*May, you’re not welcome.*

Coulson sends Weaver back to the Iliad to await his orders, and May can barely make herself lift her gaze when she feels Coulson address her.

“I don’t believe Skye would turn against us,” he says, sounding dismayed.

“You didn’t see her fight me,” May grumbles.

*No warning. No explanation…*

“Her mother had just been shot, I can believe she was confused,” Coulson responds fairly.

“No more than the rest of us,” Jemma says, looking the most upset of the three of them. “Why invite SHIELD only to attack?”

“I don’t know, but maybe their peace offering over there does,” Coulson says, looking at the space behind them.

Behind them, Cal continues to sing.

**Skye:**

The dust is settling, and everything outside is quiet hours later as Skye watches them pull bullet fragments from her mother’s shoulder. Jiaying is relatively stoic throughout the process, but she occasionally grimaces and breathes every breath slowly through her teeth.
“I thought with your gift…” Skye says, remembering how it’s a miracle her mother is even alive…

“She heals, but that doesn’t mean she doesn’t feel the pain,” Lincoln says from his place leaning against a table behind her. “She feels all of it.”

Skye looks back at the healer working on her mother’s shoulder. “Does she need any blood? I can donate if—”

“I think you’ve done enough,” Lincoln mutters from behind her, and Skye whirls to face him.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

Lincoln looks like he has plenty to say and doesn’t know where to start. “It means that Jiaying was right. She knew SHIELD couldn’t be trusted, but you convinced her otherwise.” He stands up, towering over her. “Question is, why?”

“You think I knew about this?” Skye snaps, insulted.

“Lincoln—” Jiaying interrupts from behind them. “Skye feels as betrayed as we do. Maybe more. I don’t think we know the full story.”

Skye turns to her mother, renewing her reassurances. “Coulson would never—“

“I can’t do this right now,” Jiaying cuts her off, closing her eyes with a grimace as the doctor pulls another bullet fragment from her shoulder. “I want everyone to leave. I need rest if I’m going to heal.”

Lincoln gives Skye a final, cold look but obeys Jiaying quickly. Skye hesitates for only a second before following him out, turning off the path immediately and crashing through the landscaping to Raina’s cabin.

The doors of her dwelling are flung open to the sunlight, and the woman is arranging orchids in a pot on her table as Skye stomps through the door.

“You knew,” she says simply.

Raina doesn’t even glance at her, just sighs. “I’m afraid so. And now you’re here to ask about what happens next.”

“Yes,” Skye nods.

Now Raina looks at her, seeming far less smug than usual. “Well, that’s the tragedy, because even if I were inclined to tell you, you wouldn’t believe me. Not with our history.”

“Forget history,” Skye snaps. “I don’t care about the past.”

“Well you should,” Raina says, her eyes snapping back up to Skye’s, “because the past and the future are intertwined. Just like us. Our paths have been intertwined since before we even met. My true purpose—my destiny, is to help you become what you’re supposed to be.”

Skye stares at her for a long moment, trying to decide if Raina is just yanking her chain.

“I know you have every reason not to believe me,” the little woman acknowledges. “But if it serves to convince you, you should know that even when Jiaying interrogated me about who that Asian woman on your team is, I didn’t tell her who she really is to you.”
“But you told her that May was in the temple with us,” Skye snaps, glaring at her.

“Yes, well, one can’t get away with everything, I suppose,” Raina says, turning back to her flowers. “We’ll never speak to each other again, Daisy, but you’ll see. Your mother is not leading our people, she’s misleading them. It’s you who are destined to lead. Even in the darkness, you’ll see the truth.”

May:

Coulson marches straight up to Cal when their quinjet arrives back at the playground.

“Want to tell me what you’re really doing here?” the director asks, plucking the headphones from the psychopath’s ears.

“Sure,” Cal answers unnervingly easily. “I’m a present. A gift horse. A peace offering from my family. I’m also an excellent Shanghai rummy partner.”

Coulson rolls his eyes and puts the headphones back on the man’s head.

“Put him down in Vault D,” he orders the agents escorting the man, and May watches them lead him away to Ward’s old cell.

Well, I guess it was mine most recently…

Simmons goes to analyze the trace amounts remaining in the empty vials they found in Cal’s pockets, and Coulson turns to May.

“What happened?” he asks, eyes sweeping over the shiners on her face from where she struck the ground.

“She fought me to keep me from going back into the village to look for Gonzales after her mother was shot,” May answers, avoiding his eyes. “Threw me through the air with her powers and I blacked out before I hit the ground.”

She can’t face him, but she feels him staring sadly at her.

“Have we lost her?” he asks, and May sets her jaw, finally facing him.

“We didn’t lose her. She chose.”

The truth comes out when footage from the missing quinjet comes in. They stand together in Coulson’s office and watch the recording of Gordon teleporting onto the missing jet with another unknown Inhuman, snatching a SHIELD agent, and disappearing. The hijacker had piloted the plane to fire on a single building, then flew it away, presumably to hide it somewhere in the mountains.

“The whole thing was staged to make it look like SHIELD attacked,” May exhales, both relieved and sickened.

“If it’s theatre, it worked,” Coulson says, killing the feed with a little more force than necessary. “Every Inhuman up there now believes that SHIELD attacked their leader and declared war.”

Including Skye.

Hunter and Fitz suddenly rush into the office, dumping out a fast explanation that they just discovered where Bobbi has disappeared to—she left with Agent 33, who was wearing May’s face
again.

“She killed her guard and boarded a quinjet with Morse,” Fitz explains.

Coulson closes his eyes for a brief second and sighs heavily. “This reeks of Ward. He left 33 here exactly for this, I’m sure of it.”

“The quinjet’s transceiver went dark in Spain,” Hunter says, and May can tell he’s far more scared than he’s letting on. “I’m going to need a pilot to get out there and look for her.”

“With pleasure,” May says, getting to her feet. She hears Coulson pull in a breath like he wants to object, but in the end he doesn’t say anything as she makes for the hangar.

They quickly assemble a team of three other specialists and board a refueled quinjet. Hunter slips into the seat beside her an hour into the flight.

“I heard what happened with Skye out there,” he says tentatively. “Are you…all right?”

May doesn’t have an answer for that, so she lets silence cover all her bases.

Hunter doesn’t seem surprised, just nods once.

“Love can be a double-edged sword like that sometimes.”

May holds herself back from rolling her eyes.

As if I’d ever take advice on this from you.

He stays beside her for the rest of the flight, and as they begin to descend on Spain, Hunter checks the magazine of his gun, reloading it with live bullets instead of ICER rounds.

“So we’re in agreement that this hell-raiser doesn’t need to see another day, right?”

“Yes,” May says, passing her gun over for him to change out the rounds.

He does it with an air of determination. “Glad we’re on the same page.”

They find Bobbi’s quinjet in one piece in the middle of a hillside meadow with some bullet holes through a console and no one on it. Tire tracks away from the jet lead them to a nearby cattle station, and heat scans show only three inside—Bobbi, Ward, and 33 most likely.

May organizes her agents to sweep the building, but 33 and Ward are picking them off like it’s a game. After 33 fires on her from down the hall, May grabs Kingston’s walkie and gives the order that she knows their antagonists will fall for.

A minute later, the sound of four gunshots down the hall tells her that the trick worked.

But the echoing sound of a single rifle-shot upstairs tells her that they might still be too late.
K, again, putting all the notes up here before you scream at me.

We all knew this was coming, and obviously I had to tweak the situation a little to make certain later events believable (like May leaving). I'll take any feedback you throw at me for it.

As for s3 (again, this fic is only going to carry through s3’s events), I would really like to have more ready to go before I begin posting again. I don't plan to walk as finely through some of its events, since our girls will be apart for chunks of it, but I'd say there are probably 8 or 9 chapters left in what I plan to write.

For the record, s1’s chapters came out so fast because I had the most prewritten. s2a was done in NaNoWriMo, but 2b was slowly being written through my busiest semester in awhile. If nothing else, I plan to knock the rest of this fic out by the end of 2017. That said, my month ahead is going to be a little nuts, but I hope to post the next chapter by October at the latest.

Anyway, here's our second finale and a shameless request for feedback--I'm gonna need it to make it through the rest of this fic.

Please don't hate me. :(

January 8, 2015—Skye is 26, May is 45

She wakes up on a quinjet.

She has enough of her wits about her to remain still, moving only her eyes and taking in her surroundings. The first things she sees are her wrists, shackled around one of the bars of the plane and bound in thick gauntlets. She reaches for the sound of them immediately, trying to do to them what she once did to a gun, but they seem to only bounce the vibration back into her body, and she immediately feels nauseated.

Still lying still, Skye scans what she can see from her place on the floor. It’s a SHIELD quinjet all right, but it’s filled with people from Afterlife—Alisha, Gordon, and Jiaying among them. Two large black crates are strapped beneath cargo nets across from her, and outside the windscreen, black night is the only thing visible.

For a moment, she is confused, but then, suddenly, horribly, she remembers everything.

Jiaying killed Raina. Probably Gonzales too.

She said Inhumans would taking the fight to SHIELD.

The Playground…Gordon knows where that is now…
Her head throbs as she sits up quickly, and Alisha (surprise, surprise), looks down at Skye from the seat directly beside her.

“Jiaying,” the redhead calls, and her mother, who is speaking to Gordon near the cockpit, turns. Alisha jerks her chin at Skye, and her mother’s eyes fall on her.

“Where are we going?” Skye demands as her mother steps over to her.

*Please don’t say the Playground. Anywhere but there…*

Jiaying doesn’t answer, but she does leave Gordon’s side and crosses the small space towards Skye.

“Let me out of these,” Skye demands next, yanking hard against the shackles. She reaches with her powers again, but again the gauntlets seem to bounce everything back into her, and her head throbs so hard that she can barely see straight.

“Let me be clear about one thing, Daisy,” her mother says, standing unsympathetically above her. “You are only along for the ride so that we can keep an eye on you. You’ve made your position clear enough.”

“Why are you acting disappointed?” Skye snarls, staring hatefully up at her. “You killed Raina, Mom! You killed Gonzales and started a war!”

“I did what I have to do to protect our people,” Jiaying repeats, the same thing she’d said standing in a puddle of Raina’s blood.

“Raina knew I would see the truth—see who you are,” Skye murmurs, closing her eyes and leaning back against the side of the ship. “Cal’s not the real monster—you are.”

“I want our people to not have to live in fear of SHIELD forever,” Jiaying snaps. “Everywhere we go, people like them hunt us down. Remember what happened to you before Gordon brought you to us?”

“What are you planning?” Skye demands again opening her eyes and glaring at her mother. “You want a war, but you’re a handful of weirdos against a military organization. How is this not a suicide attack?”

“Because we have the most enviable weapon,” Jiaying says, her eyes darting once to the black crates in the back of the plane. “A bomb that only kills enemies and leaves allies unharmed.”

Cold races through Skye’s veins.

*The Diviner. Or the crystals inside. Or something like that.*

“Raina said you won’t be the one to save these people,” Skye said, remembering the last prophecy she heard Raina give. “You’re not leading, you’re misleading.”

“Raina made her choice,” her mother says, turning on one heel and moving back towards the cockpit. Skye looks away, swallowing hard.

*Yes. She did.*

_She said she and I would never speak again—she knew what was about to happen. She knew she was going to die and still went to talk to Jiaying anyway. After everything she’s put your team through, she went to her destiny and died…so I could see the truth._
A surprising surge of sorrow makes Skye close her eyes, biting her lip and lowering her head down into the cavern between her chest and drawn-in legs.

*Could she have run if she’d wanted to? Or do things just happen the way you’ve seen them happen, no matter what you do?*

Skye finally looks up, praying to a god she doesn’t believe in that they’re headed anywhere but the Playground. She squints back towards the front of the plane, trying to see out the windscreen, and spots Lincoln at the very end of the row.

“Lincoln, help me, please,” she whispers to her only hope of an ally.

She repeats it again and again, but he never once glances in her direction.

**May:**

It’s touch-and-go for awhile.

Her other agents are nauseated from concussions and nursing a couple of broken bones between them, but they all pull together and do their best to help Hunter keep Bobbi alive throughout the flight back to the Playground. May sets the plane on its fastest speed for as long as she can without burning up their entire fuel supply over the Atlantic. Bobbi’s pulse and blood-pressure remain at dangerous numbers, and eventually, she stops breathing and May has to do it for her with a bag.

Hunter had fumbled out an explanation—there was a gun rigged to shoot the first person who came through the door, and Bobbi, chained to a chair, had managed to hurl herself in front of the bullet as he walked in. Besides the gunshot wound, the woman’s knee is swollen, bones inside obviously broken, her hands bear signs of torture, and her face shows the marks of a fight.

May keeps the bag going, methodically breathing in and out with her, barely able to feel more hate for Ward when there is a frozen block of fear expanding in her chest every time Bobbi’s blood pressure drops.

Walker gets off comms with the Playground, saying something confusing about the lab being destroyed by the prisoner Cal, but May sees that it’s true as they land and whisk Bobbi through the halls towards the medical wing. Simmons has hastily reconstructed a surgery theater in the common area and takes over immediately, giving orders in a voice that doesn’t betray the panic May is sure she must be feeling.

*She always had to remind us that she wasn’t a medical doctor…*

May backs slowly into the hallway as they work, then continues backward until her back meets the brick wall—she needs something sturdy at the moment.

“What happened?” Coulson asks as he steps into the hallway with her while Hunter continues to hover in the periphery of the surgery.

“I think Ward wanted her to suffer as much as possible,” May answers, finally feeling the flames of fury licking at the ice in her chest. “So he covered his bases.”

“Is he dead?” Coulson asks quietly, and May closes her eyes.

“I think Agent 33 is. Walker found a big bloodstain and a trail of blood down to the garage, car
gone. I assume Ward carried Kara’s body out and not the other way around.”

Coulson sighs, then turns and leans heavily against the wall beside her.

“Hell of a day,” he whispers.

May swallows and pulls herself together.

“What have we missed?”

He sighs. "There is a distress signal going out from the Iliad to all SHIELD bases. Apparently, they’re under attack from the Inhumans."

“Jiaying didn’t waste any time, did she?” May mutters, her jaw clenching.

“We can only assume that Skye is with them, but we don’t know her status," Coulson says gravely. "Priority one is getting to the Iliad and stopping the attack."

“And Cal?” May asks, finally catching sight of Skye’s father, who is hooked to an IV drip and watching the activity around him with amusement.

“He’ll be coming with us. We got through to him, and he wants to do what he can to help us.”

May looks sharply over at him. “You trust him?”

“I don’t,” Coulson says, turning and meeting her eyes. “But there was a time I didn’t trust Skye either.”

“Looks like you were right about that one,” May says, feeling the lingering aches in her body from crashing onto stone pavement yesterday.

“You don’t mean that,” Coulson murmurs. “We have no idea what Skye’s thinking right now.”

“I should know,” May reminds him. “I’m her S.O.”

Or…I was.

“We’ll find her,” Coulson says solidly. “Cal will make sure of it.”

May clenches her jaw.

“So will I.”

Skye:

Skye is locked up in the hull of the ship when someone punches her guard out and bursts into the room.

“Mack?” Skye gasps as her teammate rushes in. “Thank God, who’s with you?”

“Trip is the only other agent who’s walking around free right now,” Mack says as he opens her cell. “We were both in the vents doing maintenance when everything started. He’s trying to get a position on the upper deck right now. Your people just took over the ship. There are about a hundred prisoners below deck; the rest are dead. Guess they’re not as harmless as you said.”
“Mack, I swear,” Skye says at the sound of the anger in his voice, “I never meant for this to happen…”

“Well we need to stop them. And I came here because I need your skills.”

“I can’t use my powers,” Skye says apologetically, gesturing to the gauntlets on her arms. “I don’t know what these are but they’re inhibiting me…”

But Mack is pulling something out of a backpack. “Not the skills I’m looking for.” He holds out a laptop, and Skye has never been so happy to see one.

By the time she’s got the computer set up and linked into the security feed, they discover three shield agents petrified in a control room, a broken blue crystal on their feet. A distress call has also been going out to all bases on the globe for the past ten minutes.

“That beacon went out to the Playground half an hour ago—but now it’s expanded,” Skye tells Mack. “Jiaying wants all these agents to come. I bet she plans to do that to all of them.”

Mack looks two hundred percent done with all of this, but he rubs his eyes and pulls it together.

“The beacon is hardwired on the other side of the ship—how many ginger ninjas and other crazies could be in the way?”

Skye manages to smile at his phrasing.

“I don’t know about the redheads, but there were only seven people on the plane out here.”

They make it to the transmission room without running to anyone though, and Mack goes to look for tools while she tries to hack into the beacon.

“How did you get out?” a voice suddenly demands from behind her. Skye spins to find Lincoln standing on the other side of the room, looking more confused than anything.

“Lincoln, I can explain,” Skye says, raising her powerless hands.

“Don’t bother.” His hands glow white, and suddenly she’s on the other side of the room and her heart is stumbling to restore a regular beat.

So that’s how it feels to be shocked back to life.

“Lincoln, you’ve got this wrong,” she gasps before he can hit her with another bolt. “That attack at Afterlife didn’t happen—Jiaying staged the whole thing! She murdered Gonzales, then shot herself so we would follow her into a war!

“Do you even hear how crazy that sounds?” Lincoln scoffs as he approaches her. “Shot herself?”

“She’s already healed, hasn’t she?” Skye demands, staggering to her feet but leaning heavily on the wall. “From two bullet wounds in the same spot? You think an agent doesn’t know how to shoot to kill with one? I’d tell you to ask Raina but she’s not here, is she?”

She can tell that he’s listening, so she plows forward.

“She’s not here because she had a vision of what happened—what’s going to happen—and Jiaying couldn’t risk her talking, so she cut her throat.”

“Why are you doing this?” Lincoln says as she takes a few shaky steps towards him. “Trying to turn
us against her? She’s your *mother*!”

“You saw what she did with those crystals!” Skye snaps, rapidly running out of patience. “She killed unarmed agents! Think, Lincoln—why would she want the rest of SHIELD to come here? She wants to execute them! We can stop them, please. Just tell me where she took the crystals.”

She’s within arm's-reach now, close enough to give him the most earnest look she can, close enough to crack his neck if he attacks her again…

But in the end, Lincoln just closes his eyes. “The fan room—where the ship’s air circu—”

Someone suddenly cracks him over the head, and Skye looks up to see Mack behind him. “I was getting through to him!” she complains, but Mack ignores her.

“No time for that now,” he says, passing over a power saw. “You hack the beacon, or just cut it. I’m gonna go make sure no one else gets hurt from those crystals.”

It takes her six painful minutes to figure out how to hack into the distress signal. Once she does, she starts to interrupt it, but then realizes it will probably bring Jiaying’s henchmen running. Instead, she puts a pattern to it, trusting someone on some SHIELD team somewhere to notice it and figure it out.

*It’s a trap.*

**May:**

Fitz catches the hidden message in the beacon and conveys it to Coulson before any planes are within range of the ship, and he gives the order for all other forces to fall back.

“What about us?” May asks from the controls, though she already knows the answer.

Beside her, Coulson’s face is set. “We’re going to finish this.”

Another message come through before they land—*modified, lethal crystals HVAC room.*

“Ah, so *that’s* what this little mutiny is about,” Cal laughs to himself from his place between four armed agents as Fitz reads it aloud. “Gas them all, see what shakes loose.”

Trip comes running up to the plane as soon as they touch down on the deck.

“What the hell took you so long?” he demands as he races up the ramp, looking exhausted and overwhelmed. “Mack’s down in the fan room already. He left Skye in the switchboard room—not sure where she is now.”

“You did good, Trip,” Coulson says, then turns to the rest of the agents. “Priority is saving the crew—find them and free them. May, you go to operations and take control of the ship. No one else is dying if we get to Jiaying first.”

“Oh no,” Cal says, standing with a smile on his face. “This is a family matter—you just find those crystals and leave her to me.”

Coulson looks back at May for a second opinion, but she’s had enough drama for one day.

“You brought him,” she grumbles, snapping a fresh magazine of bullets up into her sidearm.
Skye:

Two workers are carrying one of the crates of crystals out of the control room when Skye runs in.

“What are you doing with those?” she demands, catching her mother’s attention. Jiaying doesn’t look terribly surprised to see her, but her gaze is almost dismissive.

“What I’ve always done,” her mother answers, gesturing the men out the door with a flick of her hand. “There are descendants everywhere. I’m going to find them and build them a better world where they’re not hunted, not afraid.”

“And kill anyone in your way?” Skye says, needing to hear her say it so that she can know she’s about to do the right thing.

Het mother’s gaze hardens. “Only if they’re in our way,” she says certainly.

Skye’s heart sinks, but her fist tightens.

This is what has to happen.

“Goodbye Daisy,” her mother says, turning and walking out the door.

“No!” Skye shouts, rushing after her. “Wait!”

Alisha suddenly steps in front of her, her eyes going white. Another Alisha steps out from…behind her? Inside her? Then another, and another, and another...

Well, that explains how it felt like she was everywhere, Skye thinks dryly. I’ve seen two May’s before, but this is something else...

Her hands tighten into fists, and she stands her ground as the redheads all rush at her together.

May:

She’s working her way through the ship when Lincoln rushes around the corner in one of the halls.

“Where’s Skye?” she demands from a distance, hand falling to her gun but not drawing it, and the boy raises his hands.

“I’m not sure, but I bet she went to stop her mother,” Lincoln says. “I last saw Jiaying in the control room.”

“Get out of the way,” May snaps, running towards him, continuing her path.

“No, I’m coming with you,” he responds, turning as she passes and falling into step behind her.

“Skye was right—Jiaying needs to be stopped.”

May casts a single, scathing look over her shoulder as they race through the halls. “If you’re lying to me, kid, I promise that I will throw you off this boat.”

Four identical redheads are teamed up, kicking a curled-up Skye on the ground as she and Lincoln rush into the room. The women are dispatched quickly between her fists and Lincoln’s powers (oh
so that’s your party trick?), and as soon as they’re all down, May rushes to Skye’s side.

The girl is already reaching for her, so May grips her arm and hauls Skye to her feet.

For a long second, they just look at each other, May taking in the cuts, shiners, and already rising bruises across the girl’s face, which show that Skye’s already been fighting for their side again. From that, May decides that everything else that they need to talk about can wait until later.

“My head still hurts,” she says dryly.

Skye still hasn’t let go of her hand, but now she squeezes it even tighter.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers, still breathless from her fight. “May, I’m so sorry. I didn’t know. I’m—”

“Save it for later,” May interrupts, looking down at the manacles on Skye’s forearms. “We need to stop Jiaying.”

Lincoln blasts the restraints off, and May feels a small pulse echo through the ground beneath them as they fall to the floor and Skye’s powers come loose again.

“There’ll be more redheads coming,” Skye says, rubbing her arms. “I’ll go after Jiaying.”

She moves quickly towards the door, decision made, but May grabs her arm.

“Skye. I’ll do it.” She hates herself for saying it, but she knows it’s the right thing to do. “I don’t think your mother’s going to see reason, and you don’t need to live with what you’ll have to do next.”

“No,” Skye says firmly, pulling her arm free and taking another step away. “You don’t need to do this either.”

“You have to be willing—“ May warns…

Skye, please, you don’t know what doing the worst will do to you…

“I won’t hesitate,” Skye insists, backing towards the door. “I understand what I’m doing. Just stay away from her, May.”

There is still a trace of warning in her tone.

Another redhead marches through the door—Hold on, where did the other four go?—and May raises her fists, stepping between her and Skye again. By the time she has a chance to glance over her shoulder again, Skye is long gone.

Skye:

After the contained dimness of the ship, the brightness of the sun on the upper deck is nearly blinding.

“Mom!” she shouts, stumbling out of the door and towards her mother, marching behind two other men towards a quinjet. “Stop! You can’t do this!”

The other men set the case down, immediately moving towards her, but her mother’s commanding voice redirects them. “No—put the case on the ship. Get ready for takeoff.”
“I can’t let you leave with those crystals!” Skye gasps, her chest burning from the relentless kicks and now her heavy breathing as she stops a few meters from her mother.

“You can, and you should,” Jiaying says, rounding on her. “It's the only way to protect our people!”

“It’s not,” Skye insists. “There are other ways.”

“Whose ways? SHIELD?” her mother scoffs. “No, their way is what got us here.”

“You started this war!” Skye reminds her, and Jiaying’s eyes narrow.

“This war started decades ago when SHIELD was founded to guard the world against people like us. When SHIELD took us from one another. And it will never end.”

“This has consumed you!” Skye shouts, even as her mother gets closer. “You can’t even tell right from wrong anymore. This isn’t about protecting me or your people, this is about hate! And I can’t let you destroy any more lives.”

Her mother is so close to her now that Skye can see a hint of sadness in her eyes. Jiaying raises one hand to brush Skye’s cheek with the backs of her fingers, and Skye, for just a moment, has hope.

“My daughter,” Jiaying says almost proudly. “So strong.”

Jiaying moves her other hand to touch her face, Skye suddenly can barely stand.

All her muscles feel completely spent, as though she’s just climbed up a mountain and run down the other side, and she can barely even pull in a breath as her legs go out from under her.

“Mom!” she gasps, hanging onto Jiaying’s gaze. “What are you doing?”

But her mother only holds on tighter, and Skye realizes that this is the piece she’s missing—this is how she mother heals…

“I always believed that the reason I endured all that torture and pain was for you,” Jiaying says, not looking away. “That you were my true gift. But you’re not. This is.”

_Villages and villages…_

“But don’t do this!” Skye gasps, too weak to even raise her arms to grab at her mother’s wrists.

There is no remorse in Jiaying’s eyes. “You made your choice. I’m sorry.”

Suddenly, a gunshot rings out, and Jiaying cries out and releases Skye, who falls to her knees on the cold asphalt, catching herself on one hand and looking up to see the hijacked quinjet, the two other Inhumans still waiting for her mother on it…

Skye sucks in a desperate breath and extends one hand towards the plane. She gives the pulse everything she has left and hopes it’s enough.

“NO!” Jiaying shouts as the jet tips over, off the deck and into the sea. Skye weakly rolls over to see the woman attempting to get to her feet, one hand pressing against a new bullet wound in her calf.

Behind her, May is rushing towards them, gun drawn.

“Stand down, Jiaying!” she orders, face set, all agent.
“May! No! Get away from her!” Skye gasps, still barely able to move…

No, no, no…don’t let Jiaying see you!

But her mother’s eyes have already turned on May, briefly widening in surprise before narrowing in rage.

“You,” Skye can hear her exhaling… “You…”

Skye tries to stand but she can’t…she summons the force for another push to get May out of the way, but she’s afraid to miscalculate again and knock her into the sea too…

**May:**

Skye looks like death warmed over but is breathing and not bleeding visibly, so May goes to Jiaying first. The Inhuman leader is staring her down as she marches up.

“Surrender, and this can end without any more lives lost,” she orders, stopping a meter away from Skye’s mother with her gun still pointed at her chest. “Show me your hands.”

“May please…get away from her...” Skye is gasping, her eyes wide with desperation.

“You think I don’t remember you?” Jiaying says, raising her hands but glaring at May without a trace of fear.

“Hands behind your head,” May orders, pulling out a pair of handcuffs.

Jiaying obeys, and May moves behind her, grabbing one of her hands and snapping a cuff onto one wrist…

“May no…” Skye gasps from behind her.

Jiaying’s other hand suddenly seizes her wrist, May’s legs buckle. She falls to her knees against the tarmac, feeling like all her limbs have suddenly stopped working.

What...

Skye’s mother twists her arm around until she is facing May and grabs her by the throat, and May can’t even summon the strength to knock her arms away. The woman’s dark eyes are piercing as she hauls May’s face close to hers.

“You’re not going to do this twice,” Jiaying whispers. “I know what you’ve done. And you are not taking her from me again.”

What...

“Mom! No! Please!”

Skye’s voice sounds so far away...

If there’s air in her lungs, May can’t get to it. Her vision is darkening at the edges…

And suddenly, she’s not there.
Skye:

Jiaying looks as confused as expected as May’s clothes tumble bodilessly to the tarmac surface of the carrier. She leaps to her feet, the hole in her calf now closed again, and rounds on Skye.

“What did she just—“

May suddenly reappears on top of her clothes, still ashen and gasping, but disappears again almost immediately.

*What is she doing…*

May suddenly appears again, and Jiaying snatches at her, but she grabs only air as May disappears again.

*“Mom, stop,”* Skye gasps, still unable to stand.

Jiaying’s eyes shift to Skye, and she suddenly strides towards her…

May:

*The Playground.*

The Iliad.

*Mom’s living room.*

The Ilaid.

*The Bus’s cockpit.*

The Iliad.

*Our Texas backyard.*

The Iliad

She’s jumping back and forth between past and present so fast that she barely has time to process what she’s seeing in each gasping moment. She can barely move, is pulling in air as fast as she can, trying to clear her head…

*Stop traveling,* she wills herself. *Stay in one place, help Skye…*

But she can’t make herself stop. She can’t make herself go or stay. She’s not in control of this anymore…

With every flash of morning sun and breath of salty water, she only sees a split-second of what is happening, still frames on a moving picture, and Jiaying is getting closer and closer to Skye…

Skye:
She can barely fight back as her mother grabs her by the throat again.

No…I can’t…

This time, Skye directs the tremor right into Jiaying, clutching at one of her arms and seeing her mother’s form go blurry, just like Raina’s had once, the scars on her face opening and running with blood...

Off to the side, she sees May reappear for a long second before disappearing once more.

The second time she appears, she grabs her gun out of the pile of clothes…

**May:**

This time, she only lingers for seconds, but it’s enough time to aim correctly and pull the trigger.

**Skye:**

A gunshot rings out, and Jiaying collapses, blood running from a new wound in her thigh, but she doesn’t let go of Skye’s neck.

Skye hears May’s gun clatter to the asphalt again, sees in her periphery the empty space where May should be…

“Mom, please…” she gasps, still forcing her mother’s body to quake. Jiaying grimaces but holds on tight…

*Please don’t make us…*

Another gunshot rings out.

This time, Jiaying falls with a bullet hole in her temple.

Skye barely has time to see May lower the gun, looking horrified, before she disappears again.

**January 8-12, 2015**

**May:**

She doesn’t stop travelling like that for hours.

The appearances slowly get longer, eventually lasting minutes at a time. Between travels, she glimpses Cal helping Skye inside, then a few turns later she sees him lifting Jiaying’s body into his arms and carrying her to the edge of the deck.

When May comes back the next time, his arms are empty.

Once she lingers for a handful seconds together, she manages to crawl inside with her clothes tucked under one arm, ducking into the first open room and hiding under a table.
Just until this stops. Or slows down.

It takes a long time.

By the time the travel stretches into a few minutes in each place, she has lost track of how much time has passed in her present. She finally dresses and stumbles to the hallway just in time to see Coulson being led past, heavily supported by Trip and holding a bloodstained cloth where his left hand is supposed to be.

“Phil,” she gasps.

Fitz is behind them, directing two agents to carry a body bag out to the quinjet. He makes eye contact with her for a brief moment before she suddenly vanishes again.

After a couple of minutes on the floor of her old kitchen in the DC area, May reappears in the room, but now the door is closed, and Fitz is sitting against it.

“I’ll keep my eyes closed until you tell me to open them,” he promises, dropping his eyes and covering them lightly with one hand as soon as he sees her.

“Where’s Skye?” May demands, snatching up her clothes and starting to pull them on.

“They’ve got her and Coulson and some other injured on a plane back now,” Fitz answers, keeping his head bowed. “Skye went into shock just a moment after Cal got her to Trip, but she kept saying that you needed help too…”

“I can’t stop it, Fitz,” May gasps out, yanking on her shirt and squirming into her jeans. “I can’t make the traveling stop…”

“I don’t know if it will help, but we still have the fan room set up with the quantum disrupters, what we used to trap the teleporter inside. I have no idea if what’s happening to you is the same thing but…”

May steps directly in front of him, and Fitz finally looks up.

“How fast can you get me down there?”

She barely makes it into the fan room on bare feet behind him before she vanishes again, but this time, she reappears in the same room. The lights are off and the cargo is different, so it must be a different time, but she’s at least in the same place.

Fitz is waiting when she comes back.

“Did it work?” he asks with his back to her as she grabs at her clothes. “Did you stay here?”

“Wrong time but right place,” she answers, snatching up her clothes.

“Well, I guess that’s something. Better than reappearing in the middle of the ocean.”

“What happened in here?” she asks after she dresses, pointing to the bloodstains on the ground.

“Gordon’s dead,” Fitz answers without ceremony, face grim. “He dropped a crystal as he fell and Coulson caught it so it wouldn’t break, but his hand started turning to stone, so Mack cut it off with an axe.”

May feels sick and slowly lowers herself to the dusty ground. “Will he be okay?”
“I think so. We stopped the bleeding, and nothing else was turning to stone once his hand was off. What should I say is happening to you?”

May looks away, her chest tight.

“Tell Coulson I’ll come in once the ship docks. I don’t think I should get on a plane any time soon. Not until this—” May gestures vaguely at herself. “Stops. Or at least slows down.”

Fitz nods soberly. “Coulson ordered Weaver to get the ship stateside immediately. It should be there by nightfall tomorrow.”

Fitz leaves her alone after that, muttering something about leaving the crystals to come in on the ship rather than risk them in a plane, and May sinks down into the shadows of the room as the back and forth continues, slowly stretching into longer and longer spells in one time or another, the sickening events of the day playing on a constant loop in her mind until she nearly hurls herself against the walls with the hope of knocking herself out and substituting blackness for the memory of everything she’s just done. At one point, she stares at the crate of crystals and considers the option of cracking one on the floor, letting herself turn to stone and disappear from the story completely…but the same thoughts that kept her from that ending in the past keep her from it now.

*You’ve seen future selves that you haven’t become yet—you story isn’t over yet.*

And anyway. That’s the cowardly way out.

*Everything that’s happening now is what you deserve.*

“I need to get away from here.”

She’d been surprised to find Coulson already released from medical when she had arrived back at the Playground after lingering on the ship for two days, but his arm had been tended to as best as possible for the moment, and while a surgeon who specialized in amputations was scheduled to arrive the next day, their doctors had agreed that as long as he kept the wound clean and bandaged well, there was no reason he couldn’t be on his feet in the meantime.

Now, they’re finally standing face to face in his bunk, he in pajamas with a drawstring he can’t even tie and she in a bathrobe that is easier to pull on than the many articles she keeps abandoning on various floors. They’re barely doing more than staring at one another, both still reeling from the last two days, and now she’s giving him one more thing to be surprised by.

“I’m sorry,” he finally says. “You want—“

“I’m asking your permission to leave,” she interrupts. “The base—SHIELD—at least for the immediate future.”

She understands why he’s so dumbfounded, but she still waits for him to speak next.

“What happened, Melinda?” he finally says, the question that every other question is encompassed in. “What happened on the ship?”

She recounts it all for him—running into Lincoln, rescuing Skye in the control room, covering for her while she raced after Jiaying until Trip suddenly rushed in and took her place so that she could run after Skye…

“I think Jiaying’s ability was that she could heal herself by pulling energy out of others,” May says,
shuddering at the memory of how ashen Skye looked when May had raced out and found them on the deck, “but that essentially destroys the other person. She was using it to cripple Skye when I got out there, so I shot her in the leg to disable her. Then she got ahold of me when I was cuffing her, and it felt like I was dying. A few seconds later, I time traveled…and I couldn’t stop traveling.”

Coulson nods once, waiting for her to go on, but now May can’t look at him, so she stares at the carpet between them instead.

“I don’t know if she did it on purpose, or if Inhumans just have the ability to affect my travel, but any control I had over the travel before is all gone now. It feels like back in the beginning, after…”

“Bahrain?” he supplies, and she nods, realizing that now is the time that he finally needs to know the truth of how this all began.

“I killed that little girl, Phil,” she whispers, still unable to look at him. “She was the one controlling all the men, not her mother. She was making them fight me at first, but then she was killing them with a wave of her hand. So it was Katya, or everyone else in the room, and I shot her.”

She has to take a few shallow breaths before her next words, because saying it out loud makes it worse, makes it real.

“After Jiaying touched me, I kept disappearing and reappearing on the deck of the ship, and I saw Jiaying grabbing Skye again, so I grabbed my gun…Jiaying still didn’t let go of her when I shot her in the leg. So the next one was in her head.”

May waits and waits for him to respond. When she finally looks up at him, she sees him staring at her with a mixture of pain and pity.

May looks down again, too ashamed to look at him any longer. “Skye fought me at Afterlife to keep me from her mother—the mother she was looking for for twenty years—and now I’ve taken her away from Skye forever. The first time this happened to me, it was because of a little girl, and I assumed that she’d caused the time travel somehow. But now I’ve killed Skye’s mother, and this whole time-travel chaos is happening all over again, and I have a terrible feeling that this isn’t a coincidence.”

Coulson’s voice sounds pained. “Melinda, that isn’t—“

But abruptly, the world tips, and she’s suddenly back in the cockpit of their Bus again, hearing the unmistakable sounds of a Thanksgiving dinner in the cabin and unable to do anything more than put her head down and force herself not to cry until time dumps her back into the future. Coulson is still waiting when she reappears on top of her puddle of clothes, her eyes dry but her voice fraying in pain and frustration…

“I’m not dependable or safe to be around like this,” she manages as she yanks the bathrobe over her skin but remains on the floor. “I can’t do my job until I get this under control.”

It’s far from the only reason, and they both know it. But Coulson’s voice is gentle as he slowly slides off his mattress and joins her on the floor. He doesn’t touch her, but she sees his remaining hand rest near her knee on the rug, the gesture he wishes he could make.

“We’re all in recovery mode, May,” Coulson says gently, finally drawing her gaze up to his. “You don’t have to convince me. Do what you need to do, and take the time you need.”

The tears do fill her eyes then, and she leans over his casted arm and hugs his neck, biting her lip and speaking over his shoulder.
“I’m so sorry to leave in the middle of all this. I know you need—”

“We’ll be okay,” Coulson says over her shoulder, gently rubbing her shoulder once with his good hand before pulling back and looking her in the eye again. “But who’s going to stick with you throughout this?” He has that same worried look that he wore so constantly last time this had happened to her.

May shakes her head, getting to her feet and then bending to help him up by his elbows. “I don’t need anyone. I just need to get away before the whole base finds out my secret.”

“Where will you go?”

She shakes her head, glancing away. “I don’t know. I’m afraid to get behind the wheel of a car at this point.”

There’s a pause where she knows he’s about to say something she doesn’t want to hear, but in the end, he surprises her.

“You know, I was planning to call Andrew to come do evaluations on everyone starting tomorrow. He would probably be willing to chauffeur you somewhere if you asked him.”

She thinks of her mother’s place in Pennsylvania, a drivable distance away.

“Might not be a bad idea,” she agrees, squeezing his arm once and turning to go.

“Have you talked to Skye yet?” he asks as she heads for the door.

Last time she’d checked the security feed from the fractured med bay, Simmons was keeping Skye in a medically-induced coma while her systems recovered from the shock. “Not yet.”

“You know what I’m going to say,” Coulson says quietly as she lingers with her hand on the doorknob.

May grits her teeth. “It’s not your call to make.”

“Maybe not. But I think you know that this is mishandling something important again.”

She finally turns and looks him in the eye, saying the words she’s going to have to say eventually.

“I killed her mother, Phil. She shouldn’t want to see me again.”

He looks pained, but he shakes his head once. “Only one way to know that for sure.”

May turns away, turning the knob. “No, this is better.”

“For who?”

She doesn’t let herself look back as she leaves.

This is what happened. This is what has to happen—what’s going to happen.

And there’s no sense in delaying the inevitable.

Skye:
She’s not sure what day it is when she wakes up in a hospital bed, but her effort to get up immediately brings several doctors running. They settle her back into her bed (her energy didn’t last long) and page Dr. Simmons, who comes running in a minute later in looking like she was awakened from her first sleep in days.

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“Lie still,” she orders when Skye tries to demand information from her on what happened. “You’ve been in that bed for four days already, and if you fall and get a head injury and set yourself back another week…”

“Four days?” Skye repeats horrified. “What’s happened since the ship? Where’s May?”

Simmons finally calls Coulson, who walks in with his left arm in a sling. It takes her only a second to realize that there is a bulk missing from inside it.

“You hand…”

He tells her about the final showdown with Gordon, of Fitz being a hero and make being brave when he saw Coulson’s hand turning to stone.

“You were in a pretty bad state when your father got you inside—“

“Where’s May?” Skye demands again. “Did she make it back here yet? Is she still traveling?”

Coulson’s face is grim. “May is off duty until further notice. She asked for leave so as not to endanger anyone else or risk exposing her secret to more people.”

“Where is she?” Skye demands with a cold feeling slowly seeping through her chest. “Can I talk to her?”

Coulson shakes his head. “I don’t know where she is right now.” It sounds like he’s telling the truth.

Simmons threatens to sedate her if she tries to get out of bed again, and Skye goes back to sleep for the remainder of the night with a loop of questions playing in her mind. By the next morning, Simmons is willing to let her up after she eats a meal of solid food, but she orders Skye to keep her IV in and just roll her drip around with her.

Skye first stops by Bobbi’s bed and hears the awful story of what put her in it from Hunter, but Bobbi wakes up halfway through the tale and cracks enough of a smile that Skye is sure she’s going to be okay.

The medical wing is in shambles, and Simmons tells her that story while checking Bobbi’s IV.

“Your father’s down in Vault D at the moment,” Simmons adds as she works, sounding a little miffed about the fact. “Coulson says he’s agreed to go through TAHITI protocol, but not until he’s talked to you one last time.”

Skye nods, absorbing this fact, but she also knows that she’s not ready for this conversation today.

“Could I go get some decent pajamas from my room?” she requests from Simmons. “I promise I’ll come right back.”

Her doctor agrees, and Skye shuffles down the stone halls in her robe-style hospital gown on bare feet. With every step, she prays that she won’t find her bedroom empty, but it is. She first looks for clues of May having been there and finds her clothes from the Iliad mission abandoned in the laundry hamper, so Skye fishes one of her extra phones out of the desk and dials the number of May’s
SHIELD phone.

The call takes a long time to connect, and when it does start ringing, Skye hears the telltale vibrations in her other ear. She lowers the phone and turns towards the sound, the cold feeling her chest slowly filling her to her fingertips.

When she opens the drawer of the nightstand, she can only stare, realizing that this is no accident, that May would never have done this if it weren’t on purpose…

The phone is sitting in the drawer.

Right next to the List and the dreamcatcher.

Chapter End Notes

This was a 14000-word update, guys. Please, please leave a review.
Hey kiddos, I'm still here, and NanoWrimo has given me a boost to finally get back into writing again. I took my August/September hiatus knowing that time would be busy, but in the middle of that time I was also unexpectedly pre-approved to start long-term foster care, and October was full of getting ready for/bringing home a baby! I'm now full-time working and momming, so writing obviously went on the absolute back burner for awhile.

In the meantime though, reading so many of your lovely comments on previous chapters has been so encouraging, and I'm glad to know that there are so many of you out there reading and enjoying this story. Never underestimate how long your comments can help your favorite writers!

I don't know what to say about when to expect another update, but I really am enjoying finally getting back into this story, though rewatching the episodes is reminding me all over again how much I hated season three...send cookies please. These next few chapters will be rough. I'd apologize for the angst train that's about to ensue, but...we all knew this was coming. Sorry not sorry! :P

**January—March 2015: Skye is 26**

The days pass slowly, but they do pass.

Everyone is in recovery mode, it seems, in those first long months following her team’s trip to Afterlife. Bobbi and Coulson aren’t the only ones bearing significant injury—dozens of agents are injured from the showdown on the Iliad, and a handful are missing. Too many are dead.

Jemma won’t let Skye out of the med bay until her third waking day, but Skye would have happily sequestered herself in a basement cell instead if it been an option. She realizes that no one has gotten to hear her side of the story yet, but she can also tell from the judgment in each passing glance from every agent except Coulson that everyone has heard something about what she’s done. Every look calls her a traitor, and as much as she hates it, she knows they aren’t really wrong.

When Jemma finally releases her with her usual stern warnings, Skye’s first stop is at her bedroom to put real clothes back on. When she finds it still empty, her second stop is cornering Coulson.

“Where is she?” she says without prelude once she catches him alone in his office. It’s late morning local time, and he has several news feeds from around the world playing on the split screens of his monitor wall.

“I don’t know, Skye,” he answers quietly, his eyes remaining the rolling feeds of selected news briefings covering their cover-up of the events on the Iliad.
'Don’t lie to me, Coulson,” Skye warns, not believing it possible even as she says it but still needing to be certain. “If anyone knows where she is, it’s you.”

“I’m not lying, Skye,” Coulson responds with an exhausted echo in his voice as his eyes finally shift over to her. “I don’t know where she went. She asked for leave, and I gave it to her.”

Skye stares at him for a long moment, absorbing this fact, a cold feeling gripping her stomach.

“Is she coming back?” she eventually whispers, pressing her lips together and preparing herself for the worst news.

Coulson sighs, finally reaching for his tablet and cutting off the news feeds.

“I hope she will,” he says, turning fully to face her and taking a few steps in her direction. He still seems slightly off-balance, the stump where his left hand used to be still held close against his chest inside a sling. “But she needs time to recover first, Skye. She couldn’t go three hours without traveling, the last time we spoke.”

Skye closes her eyes and pulls in a deep breath. Her mind supplies the images of what happened on the deck of the Iliad, the look on May’s face the last time Skye saw her…

“That’s not the only reason that she left, though, is it?” she asks, opening her eyes to watch the answer in his eyes.

Coulson holds her gaze for a moment, long enough for Skye to know that her guess was right.

“May made her choice,” he finally says, reaching for her shoulder with his remaining hand and gripping it softly. “We don’t have to like it. But she deserves to make her own choices.”

Skye nods mechanically, her gaze falling out of focus.

Yeah, she deserves that freedom—she doesn’t get many choices.

But how could she choose to leave?

Coulson’s hand remains heavy on her shoulder, and she looks up when he sighs again.

“I’m very sorry, Skye,” he says, his concerned gaze heavy on her. “Sorry about your mother, your father, about what happened at Afterlife…all of it.”

Skye shakes her head, looking away.

“Jiaying was the alpha and the omega of all the conflict. I don’t think any of us could have made her see things another way.”

Maybe my dad could have. But he never got the chance…

“Your dad is still down in lockup,” Coulson says then, as if reading her mind. “He’s agreed to go through TAHITI protocol as soon as we get someone here who can perform the surgery. Would you want to talk to him before, though?”

Skye thinks of the mess of the past few days, the mess of her twenty-six years, and wonders if this might be her last remaining common thread that could help her understand things a little better.

She nods.
Her father is seated on the cot in the cell when she removes the opacity from the forcefield barrier, but he reacts instantly, like a tightly-wound spring.

“Daisy,” he says breathlessly at the sight of her, scrambling to his feet.

Skye can’t speak just yet, so she just sets the tablet on the chair and approaches the barrier while he does the same from the other side.

“I’m so glad to see that you’re all right,” her father says, his eyes skittering over her, assessing her visible injuries. “You scared me death back on that ship.”

Skye thinks of the deck of the Iliad again, the brief flashes she can still remember of what happened after May pulled the trigger…

“You saw what happened. To Jiaying?” she asks, wrapping her arms around herself and gazing downwards.

“I didn’t get out there until it had already happened,” Cal answers, sounding pained. “But, an agent shot her?”

Skye nods, the sick feeling in her stomach closing its fist tighter.

“Coulson says that no one found her body, though,” she says, glancing up at him. “Do you think we’ll see her again?”

Cal’s face is grim. “I don’t think so. I helped get you inside before you collapsed, and when I came back out, she was still lifeless. So I said my goodbye and threw her body into the sea.”

Skye closes her eyes and swallows hard. “Okay.”

*One more goodbye I didn’t get a chance to say.*

“I’m very sorry, Daisy,” Cal says, the pain evident in his voice. “I wish things had ended differently. I really thought we were all finally together again forever, that we were going to leave death and horror behind and finally have a chance at a normal life together…but your mother was past saving. I guess we see now.”

Skye opens her eyes to meet his, pursing her lips sadly.

“Where did it all go wrong?”

Her father looks heartbroken as he sighs and stuffs his hands in his pants pockets. “I told you that SHIELD—or I suppose, Hydra—came for your mother in her village back in China when you were a baby. That I left you with people I trusted and tracked her to Europe, trying to get her back.”

Skye nods, thinking of their conversation in San Juan only a few weeks ago, her first time to learn anything about her past. “Yes.”

“I told you that I put her back together,” Cal goes on. “I told you that her gift was the real miracle. You’ve seen it now—how she can pull life out of others and use it to heal herself.”

Skye nods stiffly.
That’s the last touch of hers that I ever got to feel…

“Well, that’s what she had to do after I put the pieces back together—she needed someone else to donate the energy for her body to work again. And not just one person—nearly a dozen lives were necessary just to get her back on her feet so that we could leave Europe…and try to get back to you.”

Skye feels sick, but she folds her arms tighter around herself and forces her feet not to move, refusing to back away from the truth.

“Once your mother was well enough to travel, we made our way back to China as quickly as we could, but it was slow going.” Cal looks down, deep in the memory. “She was very weak, and we were trying to fly under the radar, not sure if Hydra would come after us again if they knew she was still alive…so by the time we got back, your first birthday had already passed. We couldn’t wait to see you. But when we got to where we’d left you—the village was gone. Everyone dead, carelessly buried, and it looked like an armed attack. We went to the neighboring villages looking for you, or for someone who knew what had happened.”

Skye swallows once.

“And then you killed them all.”

She gazes steadily at him, wanting to be wrong. But he continues to look down, seeming ashamed.

“Your mother wanted vengeance on the people who lost you.” He finally looks up at her, his eyes shimmering faintly. “I just wanted my family back.”

Skye can’t form a response this time, and Cal eventually takes up the story again.

“In one of those villages, we ran into armed agents. I never really was sure what was happening, who was shooting at who, but Jiaying swore she saw a SHIELD agent carrying you away from the chaos. By the time we found his body, dead from a neck wound, someone else had already picked you up. And that was when we tried finding you by pursuing the SHIELD agents who had been there.”

Skye closes her eyes, the names of the dead and defected agents floating up in her mind.

“And that village?” She can’t look at him.

Her father’s voice sounds like cracked ice.

“Jiaying was merciless.”

Skye looks up at him again, and this time he meets her gaze, looking somber.

“You knew she was like that,” Skye says, shaking her head. “You knew what she was capable of, and yet you still fought all these years to bring me back to her?”

Cal shakes his head, withdrawing his hands from his pockets. “I didn’t think she would always be like that. I thought that eventually, she might be well enough to be herself again—the person I’d fallen in love with, the woman I’d married. But the years went on, and the woman I’d known before never did come back to me. The one thing that kept us together was our pursuit of you, and eventually, she gave up. Withdrawn back to Asia and started the Afterlife community, hoping to have strength in numbers if someone like SHIELD ever came for her again.”
“And you couldn’t stay,” Skye says, thinking of Jiaying’s banishment of Cal from Afterlife in the past week.

He looks up at her, smiling haplessly. “Well, I didn’t want to give up on you.”

Skye remembers Raina’s story.

“Thailand?”

Her father nods. “I tried making a living as a doctor in the States, still looking for you but trying to get some kind of a normal life going again. Though my clientele was usually less than savory, I was making a decent living. I went through Asia again briefly after bringing a potential gifted to your mother. That was when I met Raina.”

Skye considers the years of stories that he must have to tell, but she knows that this is a road she can’t bring herself to look down, not when it’s a life that he’s about to forget.

“And what kind of life would you want now?”

Cal glances at the cell around him. “Well, I’m still a capable doctor, though I understand if no one trusts me around vulnerable humans with scalpels ever again. I would like to do some good, though, if anyone would give me a chance.”

“What about with animals?” Skye asks, getting an idea. “Do you like them?”

His face lights up. “I do! You know, I always dreamed we might get a dog once we were all together again,” he says, smiling excitedly. “A home is not a home without a pet!”

Skye manages a difficult but not fake smile.

“And where would you live?” she asks next.

“Oh, Milwaukee is always going to be home for me,” Cal answers without hesitation. “It’s always the place I pictured someday having a life again.”

“Close enough that I could visit,” Skye says, trying harder to smile.

His smile gets brighter. “That would be the...”

“Best day ever?” Skye finishes for him, her smile turning indulgent. “You have a lot of those.”


Skye hesitates for a moment, then touches the controls to remove the barrier between them. She walks fearlessly towards her father and wraps her arms around his ribs, feeling him return the embrace after only a startled moment. Skye presses her face into the shoulder of his jacket and inhales, memorizing and memorializing and trying desperately to hold onto her composure as she says goodbye to the last person she waited her whole life to know.

“I wish things had gone differently,” she manages in a trembling voice, tramping down on a sob.

Cal smooths a gentle hand across her back. “Oh, don’t I know that feeling,” he sighs against her.

Skye pulls back a moment later but remains standing close to him, biting her lip before speaking.

“Thank you for not giving up on me. Or on…my mom.”
Cal smiles, one of his hands reaching up to clasp her shoulder gently. “You could change the stars easier than you could have made me give up on you.”

A few days later, she says a final goodbye to her father at the door of their base. She watches him go and holds onto her tears until the hangar door closes behind him again, then makes her way back to her room, the room where she is still hoping every time she opens the door that she will see the person she never expected to lose from all this.

Behind her locked door, she slowly sinks down into the bed that still smells like the most peaceful time of her life, burrowing into the duvet and pressing her face into the pillow from the other side of the bed. She forces herself to breathe past the echoing chasm in her chest wishes to god that she was a better person, that she could feel this third loss more deeply, but there’s nothing left to carve out of the place where her heart used to hang between her lungs.

She can only miss one person at a time.

It takes a few weeks before things start taking on some semblance of normal again. Coulson tries to get her to take time off too, but after a couple of days of grieving alone in her room and fielding a handful of concerned visits from Jemma, Coulson, and even Fitz, Skye rouses herself to get out of her own head and back into action. She makes herself eat, shower, and even go down to the training room and take up her daily fitness routine again. Every moment of every day, everything is simultaneously the same and different.

Though she’s ashamed to make the comparison, she wonders if this is how Coulson feels, learning to navigate life with a missing limb.

There is a lot of clean-up to do from the mess on the Iliad and at Afterlife, and Coulson requests that she accompany the team he sends there to gather any left-behind intel on the Inhuman population. Skye doesn’t have it in her to feel offended or ill-at-ease over the assignment—she’s just glad for something to do.

When they land in the deserted mountain village, she posts guards around the area, points the science team towards the healing buildings, and sends Trip and a few other agents out with appropriate scanners, but she doesn’t let anyone go with her to Jiaying’s dwelling. This is something she has earned the right to do alone.

There are stacks and stacks of books written in both Chinese and English, and Skye boxes them up without looking through them. There are drawers of clothes that she touches sadly, flips through looking for hidden items, but eventually leaves where she found them. There are small collections of pretty things on shelves and surfaces, objects whose stories Skye will never know. And then there is a trunk at the foot of the bed, one where Skye discovers a small box of exactly what she was both hoping and dreading to find.

Photos.

They’re unorganized and mismatched, an assortment of sizes in various states of aging. Some are faded three by five color shots, some are glossy three by three black-and-whites. A handful are printed on brittle cardstock, yellowed with age. Skye lays them out on the floor around her, looking at faces of men and women she doesn’t know until she finds the only two she does.

Her mother, a preteen girl with a long braid, dressed in traditional Chinese garb and gazing seriously at the person behind the camera. Her mother, a long-limbed teenager with loose, flowing hair, grinning with her arms around an older child that Skye doesn’t recognize. Her mother, smiling softly
with her head leaning against Cal’s temple as they stand at the side of a river in a yellow dusk, arms around one another’s waists. Her mother in a red dress and Cal in a smart suit, smiling in a way that announces what day it is.

Her mother, eyes tired but bright with joy, holding a baby.

Skye holds onto that picture the longest, not caring that she can feel the glossy paper going soft in her hands. She stares at the two faces in the frame, two people who are strangers to her—her unscarred mother and her infant self. Jiaying looks the same as she did the last time Skye saw her except for her unblemished skin and the softness in her eyes. Baby Skye—no, baby Daisy—has a head of wispy, dark hair, dark eyes, and a heart-shaped face not yet filled out with baby fat. Her mother is cradling the infant against her chest and smiling tiredly at the camera, but she still seems to truly be glowing.

There are a few more pictures documenting her first few months of life--most of them are of the baby in Cal or Jiaying’s arms, some outside on the streets of a village, some inside on the same recurring sofa. There is one photo where the baby is sitting up on her own, and Skye guesses she must be at least five or six months old, but there seem to be no photos more recent than that in the box.

Skye knows why.

Their world fell apart.

When it’s time to leave that evening, Skye has only the small box of photos in her own bag. The crates of books, equipment, and electronics are loaded up and stowed in the hold of the plane, and she counts three times to make sure that they have all their agents accounted for before the plane takes off again. As the craft lifts into the air, Skye watches the community disappear into the shadow of the mountains and says one more goodbye.

She has no intention of ever coming back.

Bobbi recovers quickly over the first couple of months after her rescue, and Skye is both glad and heartbroken to see her trying so hard to be one less thing for everyone to worry about. As soon as her shoulder has mended well enough, Bobbi is allowed the mobility of a wheelchair, though her knee has to remain awkwardly elevated out in front of her while it recovers from what ought to be her last surgery. Hunter barely leaves Bobbi’s side during those weeks, and Skye doubts she’s the only one who notices the softness between them that wasn’t there before. She can also tell that Bobbi is frustrated with the slowness of her body’s recovery, but she’s making a visible effort to be positive.

No one can rush getting better.

Andrew Garner rotates in and out of the Playground over those weeks too, and Skye finds it easiest to just avoid him when he’s in their halls. Still, she’s not exempt from Coulson’s requirement that every Agent sit down for at least one consult with the doctor, and Skye grudgingly takes her place across the table from him one morning when spring is just starting to peek around the edge of winter.

“How have you been, Skye?” Dr. Garner asks gently, offering her a concerned smile.

Skye knows she should have something cutting and sarcastic prepared for every question he offers her, but she doesn’t even have the energy to fight anymore.

“Do you know where May is?” she asks instead of answering, staring steadily at him and watching for the truth. He drops his eyes immediately, which means yes, but he surprises her by telling the truth.
“I know where she was two months ago, but I’m afraid she’s left since then.”

“Your old newlywed pad?” Skye prods.

“Her mother’s place, actually,” Dr. Garner answers, surprising Skye again.

*She still has a mother to talk to?*

“When was the last time you saw her?” she asks, but this time he deflects.

“I think we’re here to talk about you,” he says, lifting a brow patiently.

Skye looks away. “I don’t feel like talking about me.”

“You’ve been through a lot, Skye. Not just in the past month, but in the past year, too.”

“They pay you four hundred an hour for that kind of impressive observation?”

“What makes you think I’m getting paid to be here?”

‘The fact that you haven’t walked out yet,” Skye answers, turning her gaze back on him. He only smirks knowingly.

“Gonna need to up your game, Skye, if you want me to dismiss you from this session. You’re still sitting here, too.”

She sighs towards the ceiling, considering walking out, but he just quietly asks another question.

“Let’s start with the basics. How have your sleeping and eating habits been in the past month?”

“Spotty,” she answers honestly. “It’s hard to sleep, alone with my thoughts.”

Dr. Garner’s poker face doesn’t crack as he writes something down on his clipboard.

“What about your self-harming habits from the past? Have you had any relapses?”

Eyes still on the ceiling, Skye lifts her arms briefly, turning them once so that he can see that they are devoid of any wounds.

“I’ve been around the therapy block, Doc. I have better methods of dealing with pain now.”

“And how about your powers? What changes have you experienced since the last time we had a consult?”

“I know how to use them now,” Skye answers tiredly. “My psychotic, murderous mother taught me, back when she was playing nice.”

“Would you tell me a little bit more about that?”

She sighs, closing her eyes. “Things were good and then they weren’t. Now she’s dead. The end.”

“Coulson told me she tried to kill you first,” Dr. Garner says, his pen still scratching.

“She did,” Skye says, propping her elbow on the arm of the chair and resting her forehead on the heel of her hand. “She has powers too, the kind where she can suck the life out of someone with skin-to-skin contact. It helps her heal herself. That’s how she survived being butchered by a Nazi doctor twenty years ago.”
“Then how is she dead?”

“May shot her in the head. And then my father threw her into the sea.”

A long, taut silence follows that statement, but Skye keeps her eyes closed.

“I don’t blame May for doing what she did,” she eventually says, taking a deep breath. “She was just doing what she’s always done—taking care of me. But I think that’s part of why she left—she thinks I won’t forgive her for this.”

“May will come back when she’s ready to,” Dr. Garner says then, the gentleness in his voice finally drawing Skye’s gaze upwards.

“No,” she says, raising her head and finally meeting his eyes. “That’s not how it works. She left me again and again for twenty fucking years, and then she promised that she wouldn’t leave anymore, but then she did. So now, I don’t know what to think.”

“Did she promise that she wouldn’t leave?” Dr. Garner asks knowingly. “Or did she promise to always come back?”

Abruptly, her throat closes up, and Skye leans back in the seat, staring up at the light in the ceiling until she can convince herself that her eyes are burning for a different reason.

“I just…” she finally whispers, swallowing hard, “I thought she really loved me.”

She hears Dr. Garner sigh.

“Honestly, so did I.”

Two weeks later, she and Bobbi bump into each other in the community bathroom one evening. Skye is standing at one of the sinks, analyzing the state of her split ends and contemplating the scissors in her hand, when Bobbi clicks into the bathroom on her newly-issued crutches, dressed only in a bathrobe.

“Snip snip day?” Bobbi asks pleasantly as the door swings shut behind her.

Skye nods, attempting a small smile—it’s good to see the woman halfway back on her feet.

“Where’s Hunter?” Skye asks, noticing his absence like he’s become one of Bobbi’s limbs.

The blonde laughs a little, using one of her crutches to hook her shower caddy off a shelf and set it on the floor. “Outside this room, importantly,” she says, sliding the basket noisily over the tiles. “There’s only so much smothering a girl can handle in a day”

“You know you like it,” Skye says, watching as Bobbi shuffles towards the last shower, the one with handicapped modifications.

“No one likes being incapable,” the blonde reminds her, making Skye’s gut pinch with shame.

“Do you need any help in there?” she offers, though not sure she’d be brave enough to join the woman if she asked.

Bobbi just shakes her head though. “If you hear a crash, come make sure I’m alive, but I think I can manage.”
Skye waits until Bobbi has the water running and her bathrobe hanging safely outside the stall before going back to her task at hand.

Cutting her own hair isn’t actually that hard—she’s done it several times, starting even before she’d run away at seventeen. Though she often wound up with slightly uneven layers and the occasional missing lock, Skye had never really minded doing it for herself. But now, as she stands at the same mirror where she and May had once stood together, Skye finds it harder and harder to close the scissors.

*She should be here.*

*She shouldn’t have left…*

*But she did.*

Determination kicks sadness aside and hands the reins to anger. Skye reaches up and gathers a fistful of hair in one hand and picks up the scissors.

By the time Bobbi steps out of the shower in her bathrobe again, what remains of the hair on Skye’s head barely reaches her chin. The rest of the severed locks either lie in the sink or are scattered across the floor.

Bobbi stops short, taking in the sight, but recovers quickly.

“Whoa. Check you out, girl,” she says, shifting closer and standing behind Skye to inspect the cut from all sides.

Skye stares straight ahead at the mirror, clutching the scissors in a tight grip and barely meeting Bobbi’s gaze.

“It’s a really good look on you, Skye. Very edgy. I’m definitely a fan. It’s a little scraggly in the back, though—can I help you even it out?”

Wordlessly, Skye holds up the scissors, and Bobbi pries them gently from her grip.

“Look straight ahead,” the agent orders from behind her, and Skye lifts her head, though she lets her gaze remain unfocused in the mirror. Bobbi props one of her crutches against the sink, and Skye stands stock-still while the scissors snip carefully around the back of her head.

The space in her chest is so deep today that it feels like it’s echoing.

It doesn’t feel like it takes much time before Bobbi’s fingers are combing gently through her hair, a gesture that seems intentionally soothing rather than utilitarian, and Skye lets her eyes fall shut. Bobbi reaches around her and sets the scissors in the sink, but then her arm comes up to gently squeeze briefly around Skye’s waist. Skye has the presence of mind to not lean back against her and knock her off-balance, but she tips her head into the contact when Bobbi’s jaw brushes against her temple.

“My door is always open,” the woman whispers, the arm around Skye’s waist squeezing briefly, “if you ever want to talk. Or if you just don’t want to be alone.”
Skye opens her eyes and meets Bobbi’s for a moment in the mirror. The other person reflected there has a healing lung and a busted knee, yet somehow Skye still feels like the more broken one of the two.

“I just miss her,” Skye whispers, blinking a pair of tears down her cheeks. “I’m trying to get over it, but I still miss her all the time…”

“I know,” Bobbi says, pressing a brief kiss to her hair, still holding her steadily. “It’s gonna hurt for a while, and there’s no shortcut through it. You don’t have to feel guilty about not getting over it overnight.”

Skye looks at the crutch leaning against the sink and knows Bobbi’s right.

“Thank you,” Skye says, reaching for the crutch and turning within the embrace to hand it back to Bobbi. “Let me walk you back to your room.”

“Are you kidding, sister?” Bobbi says, quirking a brow as she tucks the crutch under her shoulder again. “You gotta stay and clean up all this hair.”

Skye still comes to her room that night once she’s cleaned up the bathroom. She falls asleep next to the other agent after a few episodes of Parks and Rec, realizing only after she gets up for training the next day that it was her first good night of sleep in months.

Only a few weeks later, however, any progress in her well-being is blown to pieces when another bomb drops within their very walls.

Skye has watched the security footage on loop for hours, but it still feels impossible to stomach the sight of Jemma disappearing into the liquefied rock. For over two days, she can barely sleep, can barely put food in her mouth, can barely leave the room where the object that they’re calling the Monolith is stored. She and Fitz and the rest of the science team talk about every option they can think of, but they are swimming in uncharted waters. They try everything to stimulate the rock, dropping probe after probe into the container, but the stone refuses to react to any of it. Skye stands with her hands on the safety glass and listens with her powers, listening for any irregularities, any sign of Jemma’s signature frequency inside…but she hears nothing.

On the third day, she asks Coulson to call May.

“She’d want to know,” is all Skye says, pleading with her gaze.

Coulson only shakes his head.

“I don’t know where she is, Skye,” he says apologetically. “I haven’t heard from her since she left either.”

Skye walks away, not trusting herself to give a fair response—it’s not Coulson she’s mad at.

That night, she falls asleep with her lamp still burning, and when she’s abruptly awakened by the sound of her keyboard clicking next to her head, she opens her eyes to see May standing naked beside the bed, her eyes on the laptop screen.

Without thinking, Skye seizes her hand, confirming May’s presence, watching the way her eyes go wide with surprise but don’t seem apologetic. Skye sits up, tightening her grip, taking in the May that doesn’t look so different from the last time Skye saw her…
Back when she was only time-traveling at will.

Back when you told her to go a few months into the future...

Realization crashes over her, bringing devastation right on its heels, and Skye practically hurls May’s hand away from her as she covers her face before the sob breaks through.

“How could you do this?” she whispers from behind her hand. “How could you do that and then leave?”

A second later, she hears May disappear again. Skye opens her eyes to the empty room, takes a deep breath, and climbs off her bed.

“Come on in,” comes the voice on the other side of the door at Skye’s knock.

Bobbi is alone on her bed, dressed down in yoga pants and a t-shirt, her bad knee propped up on pillows with a cold wrap around it.

“What’s up, sister?” Bobbi asks, lowering the magazine she was reading to her chest. “Any word on Simmons?”

Skye can’t come up with a short answer to that question, but she closes the door behind her and goes quickly to sink down beside Bobbi on the bed.

“What’s going on?” the other woman asks, concern clear in her voice, reaching around Skye and tugging her over into a half-embrace.

It’s the only kindness needed to make Skye finally crumble.

She hides her tears behind her hands until Bobbi presses a tissue into it, and then she keeps her eyes down until she can speak without shuddering.

“I’m sorry,” she gasps against the duvet, forcing her words not to tremble. “I just…Simmons…and I thought maybe if Coulson could call May, she’d come back, at least for her, but he can’t, and then I just saw May but she has no idea that this is coming…”


Scrambling for a story, or a convincing lie, Skye falls silent, but then Bobbi smooths a reassuring hand over her shoulder.

“You know, Skye,” Bobbi says quietly, “I don’t know if May told you, but I know about her time-traveling.”

Startled, Skye finally looks up at her, brow furrowing. Bobbi looks apologetic and continues quickly.

“It was back when you were out with Coulson on a mission and we were here interrogating Bakshi. She told me about the time travel because he’d seen her disappear on the Miami mission, and she was afraid that he might try to use it as leverage against SHIELD.”

It makes sense, and Skye sighs, sinking back down into the pillow.

“So you know about her.”

“Just the basics.”
Skye hesitates, then takes a deep breath.

“Do you know how the time travel fits into my story?”

Bobbi’s fingertips slide softly through the ends of her hair. “Tell me.”

And actually, Skye tells her everything.

It’s therapeutic, really--she has never told anyone the whole story, from foster care all the way up to hacking SHIELD and meeting the love of her life for the first time at twenty-three (no, you were actually already twenty-five…). Bobbi is quiet and somber for most of the hour-long tale, listening with little reaction for most of the story.

“So,” she says when Skye finally reaches the present-day part of the story, “what you’re saying this story is twenty years long for you, but only a couple of years long for May?”

“Yeah,” Skye says with a nod against Bobbi’s shoulder.

“Well, I should have been giving her so much more credit. She really dove in deep fast with you, but man, the pressure of you already knowing so much about your relationship that she didn’t…that couldn’t have been easy.”

Skye sighs. “No. I know it wasn’t. And four months felt like forever when I was finally with her and still waiting for what I’d been waiting on for twenty years. But yeah, she gave me her best. We had something great for a while.”

“But surely she knew how much she meant to you, your relationship being so significant in her life. So why would she just up and leave?”

Skye thinks of her birthday date with May a few months ago, of the conversation she had left at a stalemate with their empty wineglasses on the table.

“She did warn me this would happen…” Skye says, her throat getting tight again, “that if there came a time when I needed her to go, she wouldn’t hesitate. If she thought leaving was more loving than staying…”

“How could that be the case?” Bobbi says, her skepticism audible.

Skye closes her eyes, thinking of the confrontation at Afterlife. “I told her she wasn’t welcome there. I was afraid she would get hurt, but I never got the chance to explain. We got split up, and then the last time I saw her was when she shot my mom.”

Skye swallows hard. The fact still feels surreal.

“And I’m sure the bigger reason that she left because she probably thinks I must hate her for doing that--killing my mom. And yeah, she shot her, but at that moment, it was Jiaying or me. One of us would have had to do it—there was no stopping my mom by then.”

“There was no way for all three of you to make it out of that,” Bobbi agrees. “Someone had to do the hard thing.”

“And it was just typical May. That’s what she’s always doing—making the hard call, doing the worst thing—so that no one else has to. It’s like she can’t have any mercy on herself, like she’s always trying to endure more punishment because she thinks she deserves it…”
Skye falls silent, remembering the other thing she learned at Afterlife, the way May always talked about her time-travel as a curse...

“I think it’s because of what she did in Bahrain. She thinks this is what she deserves, and that’s all she can let herself have—pain and guilt.”

“Have you talked about that with her before?”

“Not really. Just once. I thought we’d have another chance but…”

“Well, you did just tell me that she always comes back.”

Skye closes her eyes, remembering how many times she heard May tell her that throughout her childhood, remembering all over again how many promises May has broken by leaving again…

Bobbi doesn’t say anything as she starts to cry again, just presses a fresh tissue into her hand and smooths one hand gently over the crown of Skye’s head. “You know, I already thought you were a rockstar Skye, but the fact that you’ve been through so much and you’re still standing…”

“Currently lying down and crying, but okay…”

“Let me compliment you, kid,” Bobbi says, scratching gently against her scalp. “I’m trying to tell you how awesome you are.”

“Don’t Bobbi,” Skye says, burying her face in the duvet. “I’m such a mess.”

“No. You’re only human, Skye.”

Bobbi waits for her to settle down again before offering her one of the Cactus Coolers she keeps in the cabinet of her nightstand. Skye sits up to accept the drink, and Bobbi loops an arm around her side and holds her in a steady embrace while she sips her own can. Once she can speak again, though, Skye finally blurts out the other big thing she’s been thinking about for a few weeks now.

“I told you how May saved me from my suicide attempt,” Skye says, turning her arm so that Bobbi can see the scar on her right wrist. “The first time she saved my life.”

“Yeah,” Bobbi murmurs, running her thumb gently over the line. “That’s really something.”

“Well,” Skye goes on, “that was the night she kept calling me ‘Skye,’ and I later figured out that that was the name she would know me by someday, and that’s when I changed my name.”

“Gotcha.”

“Well, when I met my parents, I learned that my birth name was Daisy. Daisy Johnson.”

“That’s different,” Bobbi responds diplomatically.

“Yeah. It’s not the name I would have picked, obviously, but…it’s one of the only untainted things that I’m getting to bring out of the whole mess with them. It’s kind of the one good thing I have to show for my lifetime search for my origins.”

She pauses, but Bobbi waits in knowing silence, her arm still steady around Skye’s shoulders.

“It’s just…” Skye finally starts again, “May technically named me Skye. She’s been intersecting my life again and again and influencing my future in so many ways… but I think I want to start from here and try to be the person I was always supposed to be—the person I might have been without
“Are you saying what I think you’re saying?” Bobbi says, and Skye finally turns to face her.

“Could you call me ‘Daisy’? Just so I can try it out?”

Bobbi’s smile is soft and understanding. “Daisy,” she says, smoothing a hand through her short hair again, “you’re an absolute rock star.”

Within a week, Daisy has settled on the name change. Within two, almost the entire science team has managed to stop calling her ‘Skye’, and Daisy knows exactly who she has to thank.
April 10—September 8, 2015: May is 45 and 46, Skye is 18, Daisy is 26 and 27

She’s dozing off beneath her sunhat when she feels someone walking just a little too directly towards her chair on determined feet. Her muscles tense as she opens her eyes, her hand already shifting towards her bag where she is still carrying a sidearm…

“It’s just me,” he says as her eyes focus on him, squinting in the late afternoon sun.

She instantly converts her squint into a glare behind her sunglasses.

“What are you doing here?” she demands, not moving her hand from the bag beside her.

“Oh, just here for the view,” Andrew answers, sitting down on the chair beside hers and looking toward the ocean. “I used to love this place too, you know.”

Melinda lets her expression soften minutely and turns her sour gaze back towards the sea.

Should have known it was only a matter of time...

“Did you tell anyone where I am?” she asks a few minutes later, once she’s had time to process his presence and all it might mean.

“No,” he answers in a tone that tells her it’s the truth. “When you start talking to your people again is up to you.”

“Is it? One of them just flew all the way to Hawaii to speak to me.”

“Don’t flatter yourself, Melinda,” Andrew says, drawing his legs up onto the lounge chair and settling back into the cushion. “I needed a vacation, too.”
She waits for him to say something else, but he actually dozes off next to her for a while, and she goes back to her book, still unconvinced that he isn’t here for other reasons but not mad enough to leave her seat. It’s not until a group of children start feeding the seagulls about an hour later and bring the flapping, cawing flock right over their heads that Andrew wakes up with a start.

“Just like I remember,” he says with a smile, pushing the brim of his cap up on his forehead and watching the airborne chaos. “I always liked what a family beach this was.”

“Are you staying at this place too, then?” Melinda asks, nodding in the direction of the unassuming beachfront hotel behind them. They had stayed there once in the past too, though their subsequent trips to Maui during their brief marriage had all been to nicer hotels.

“Nah, I’m at the airport hotel,” Andrew answers, sitting up and planting his bare feet back on the sand. “I fly out again tomorrow. Just came out to check on you.”

“I thought you were here for the view,” Melinda reminds him, quirking a brow behind her sunglasses.

“You’re in my view,” Andrew says, returning the look.

They sit in silence for a while longer as the sun sinks lower, and when Melinda’s stomach growls to remind her she hasn’t eaten since breakfast, she decides to meet Andrew halfway.

“That sushi place that we used to like is still down the beach. Let’s eat there before you go.”

He doesn’t make her talk as they walk down the sand together, her bag over one shoulder and her shoes dangling from the same hand. By the time they’re seated at a beachside table, Melinda is feeling slightly less suspicious, but she still prickles at his choice of a first question.

“How’s the time travel these days?”

She shrugs slightly, her eyes turned towards the relentless ocean. “More or less like before.”

“Before, as in, 2008?”

“As in 2010,” she corrects him.

It’s taken a couple of months, but her time-travel habits are finally starting to resemble how things were before Coulson died—that sweet spot when she had been traveling mostly after nightmares and only occasionally during her waking hours. The control that she’d had over her ability after the incident in Puerto Rico hasn’t returned, which is both a disappointment and a relief. Her older self had warned her back before Christmas that it wouldn’t last—at least now, Melinda knows the way it happens.

“I’ve been wanting to tell you,” Andrew says, glancing up at her, “I heard a weird noise in the middle of the night in my place a few weeks ago. Went in the bathroom where I thought I’d heard it and didn’t find anyone there, but there was some blood smeared on the floor. Did you travel there recently?”

Melinda shakes her head truthfully. She has, in fact, traveled to their old home—now his home—a handful of times over the past couple of months, but never with open wounds. She thinks her last birthday when she walked into their bedroom and found a Jiejie, a future self, curled up on their bed and bleeding from her side. Hopefully, the incident that left the blood in Andrew’s bathroom is from the same time.
Another flag in the slowly-unspooling future.

“Do you think you’ll go back to SHIELD soon?” Andrew asks when their food arrives, but Melinda keeps her eyes on the plates as she picks up her chopsticks.

“I don’t know. The longer I’m here, the more certain I am that I shouldn’t.” She reaches for a piece of sushi but doesn’t bring it to her mouth.

“What are you running from, Melinda?” Andrew asks then, making her drop the food on the plate again and look up sharply.

“Who said I was running?” she demands, glaring at him in the sunset.

He doesn’t look intimidated though, just holds her gaze. “You’ve always done the brave thing, Melinda. What exactly do you think you’re doing now?”

She considers standing up and leaving the meal right then, but also realizes it would just be doing exactly what he’s just accused her of.

“I needed some space,” she says through gritted teeth. “You remember that, don’t you?”

He shakes his head tiredly. “Course I do. But breaking up with your girlfriend doesn’t have to mean leaving the organization that—“

“That wrecked my whole life, Drew.”

He continues to gaze sadly at her, and she finally looks away first.

“Time travel happened to you, and you didn’t leave,” he reminds her as she stares out at the reddening twilight. “Coulson died, and you didn’t leave. SHIELD fell, and you didn’t leave. You’ve stuck with SHIELD through all this hell because its purpose matters to you, Melinda. So what’s different now?”

She stares at the sun until her eyes burn, then looks down at the table between them. “I told her I would stay if she wanted me, and she doesn’t.”

Andrew is quiet for a long time. “Did she say that?”

*I’m sorry, May, you’re not welcome here,* Skye had said at Afterlife, right before she’d hurled Melinda away with a blast that left her with a days-long headache. *I’m sorry—I didn’t know,* she’d said when Melinda caught up with her on the ship. *Just stay away from her, May,* she’d said before running out to stop Jiaying.

Melinda hadn’t listened, and now Skye’s mother is dead.

She takes a deep, slow breath, feeling the pain she’s kept spooled tightly in her chest now loosening threateningly. “I shouldn’t have let myself think it—I knew better, and I still hoped—I had finally started to think that maybe she was my second chance. I lost so much from what happened in Bahrain…but it seemed like the universe eventually balanced a little bit of all the pain by bringing me to her. Letting me give a girl a slightly better childhood even though I took another little girl’s life. Letting me make another person happy just by being who I was.”

She can’t look at him because she knows those words must hurt him to hear—and she has something even more hurtful to say, but something that will help him understand.
“I never thought I’d be happy again, Drew,” she whispers, ducking her head as her chest goes tight. “Especially not as happy as I was with her. So I should have known that it wouldn’t be something I would get to keep.”

He waits silently as she brushes a hand over her eyes, and when she finally glances up at him again, he’s staring at her sadly again.

“Why do you think you don’t deserve to be happy, Melinda?”

She looks towards the sea again, but the sun has already set, the sky now stained a shade of hostile red. “I’ve never deserved it, Drew. I can’t deserve it, after what I’ve done.”

“No one deserves anything good, Melinda,” Andrew says, shaking his head. “No one’s innocent, no one’s perfect. It’s only out of grace that God, or the universe, or whatever power you want to believe in, lets us keep having more chances to get something right.”

They eat in silence as sunset fades into night, and she pays for the meal the way she used to back when she was still trying to convince herself that they weren’t dating. He walks her back to her hotel, standing in the halo of a palm-mounted floodlight to say goodbye.

“I won’t tell anyone where you are,” he says, gazing solemnly at her. “I promise. But you should call at least Coulson. There’s a lot that’s been happening throughout the past few months that you should probably hear about.”

Back in her hotel room, she takes a shower to wash the salt and sand off her skin and bundles in a hotel bathrobe, feeling her burner phone staring at her as she fishes clean clothes out of her bag. When she’s redressed, she powers the device on, waiting to see if she has any messages, even though no one’s supposed to have this number. No notifications appear, and she tosses it back into the bag, climbing into bed and falling asleep in quickly.

What feels like minutes later, however, she wakes up somewhere else.

It’s a bedroom, dim with evening, and there is a cacophony of music bleeding through the door and curtained window. Melinda doesn’t recognize anything around her as she sits up on the grimy carpet, but she rouses herself quickly and scrounges around on the floor for clothes. They seem to be all men’s, and she pulls on a pair of basketball shorts with a drawstring and a t-shirt that’s far too big for her before creeping to the door and pressing her ear against it. More than a few voices are audible, as if there’s a party going on in the home beyond, and Melinda sighs, deciding that she can just hide in the bedroom and hope for the best.

The sound of at least two people suddenly moving towards the door makes her back away from it, tucking herself into the corner of the room where she would be hidden by the door if it opened. It does, spilling in gold light from the space outside, and two dense shapes stumble into the room, mumbling drunkenly. May realizes what is happening between the couple at about the same moment she recognizes the voice of one of them.

“Wait, hold on…” the girl is mumbling as the guy shuts the door behind them and pushes her towards the bed.

Melinda’s heart jerks in her chest.

The couple falls onto the bed together, and May holds her breath, considering her options.

Skye’s next words make the decision for her.
“No, come on, stop, don’t—“

May is across the carpet in seconds, seizing the man by the collar of his shirt and yanking him off the bed with enough force that she hears him choke.

“She. Said. No,” May snarls, hurling him into a dresser. The man is too disoriented at first to react, so May just seizes Skye’s hand and makes pulls her towards the door. The girl stumbles after her, and as May throws open the bedroom door and pulls Skye through it, she hears the man finally get enough of a breath and a clue to shout after them.

“What the fuck, bitch!”

May keeps one ear tuned behind them in case he gets it in his head to chase them but focuses more on figuring out the layout of the crowded home. It seems to be an apartment in the middle of a house party, but it doesn’t take her long to spot the front door.

“Do you have your bag?” she demands, glancing back at the girl holding tightly to her hand.

God, she’s so young.

Eighteen-year-old Skye looks more than a little drunk and disoriented, but May spies the thin strap of a small purse across her chest.

“Okay, good, we’re getting out of here right now.”

“May, you don’t have any shoes…”

May ignores this as she plows through the crowd of young adults towards the door, breaking through the haze of booze and smoke out onto an open walkway connecting rows of apartments.

“Leaving already?” another too-young-to-be-at-a-party-like-this girl drinking at the rail comments as May leads Skye past her towards the stairs. “Yo! Skye!”

Shoes might not have been a bad idea, May thinks as she makes her way over the sticky boards, heading for the stairs.

“Wait, May, stop, hold on,” Skye says, suddenly digging in her heels and pulling May up short.

“Skye, let’s just get out of here, and then we can stop and talk,” May responds, looking back at the girl pointedly.

“I know,” Skye breathes, “I just—“

But before she can finish the sentence, the girl doubles over against the side of the building, her stomach emptying messily onto the ground.

“Goddammit, Skye,” May mutters, dropping Skye’s hand and jumping back as the mess splashes slightly onto her bare feet.

Skye hunches over, gagging once, and it’s only the fear that the girl might lose her balance and tumble right into the mess that makes May move back towards her, circling widely around the blast pattern and getting directly behind Skye so she can pull her hair out of her face.

“Got anything else to take care of?” she mutters, holding Skye’s shoulder-length hair in a loose fist.

“Give me a minute…” Skye groans, sagging slightly, and May steadies her with one hand on her
“Do you live around here?” she asks as they wait. “Is this the NOLA visit? I haven’t seen you here before.”

“I live down the street,” Skye rasps, leaning heavily against the side of the building. May can smell alcohol absolutely bleeding out of her pores.

“Think you can make it there?” she asks dryly.

Skye finally straightens up, turns around, and drops her arms around Melinda’s shoulders.

“Carry meehee,” she says with a loopy grin, and May rolls her eyes, pushing one of the girl’s arms off but holding the other in a tight grip over her shoulders.

“Tell me where we’re going.”

It’s a slow journey—Skye’s steps unsteady and fatigued, and the streets around the apartment complex are buzzing with activity. It takes Melinda a few minutes to realize that it must be Mardi Gras, which explains the impressive level of debauchery the entire community seems to be partaking in. Skye gives slurred directions, her weight against May becoming heavier and heavier, and May steps over broken bottles and around a few more suspicious puddles before they leave the liveliest area behind.

“Hey, you girls need a lift?” a not-quite-sober male voice calls as they pass a porch party on a less-hectic street.

“Nah, we don’t need a car. This woman is a time-traveler!” Skye calls back, and May rolls her eyes, glad to hear only amused laughter following them.

They finally make it to Skye’s complex, a run-down block of ugly condos that might have been a college residence area once upon a time but now seems like anyone’s last choice for a party spot. Fortunately, Skye’s place is on the first floor, and May fishes the keys out of the girl’s purse and gets them through the door.

“The roommate is out,” Skye announces unnecessarily as the stumble into the dark apartment and May gropes for a light switch. “She shacks with her boyfriend most nights. I haven’t seen her in days, actually.”

May tosses the keys on the nearest table and drops Skye into a dining chair. “How long have you been living here?” she asks as she turns to lock the door behind them.

“A few months,” Skye says, slumping down in the seat. “It’s better than living on the street.”

“I’m sure,” May says, wiping her bare feet on the welcome mat. “Where’s your bathroom?”

May is hosing off her feet with the removable shower head when Skye stumbles into the bathroom with her.

“Sorry—couldn’t wait,” she grumbles, falling to her knees beside the toilet and hurling into it one more time. May shuts off the shower and quickly moves to hold Skye’s hair again, sighing.

“How much did you have to drink tonight, Skye?” May asks when there is a pause in the retching, letting the girl hear her disappointment. “Or today, depending on when you started.”
“Who counts their drinks on Mardi Gras?” Skye sighs, resting her head against the porcelain.

“Eighteen-year-olds should,” May mutters, wetting a hand towel in the sink and blotting gently at Skye’s face. “Especially when there’s assholes around who don’t understand the concept of consent.”

“Lesson learned,” the girl mutters, seeming to fall rapidly towards sleep right there on the rim of the toilet.

May sighs again.

“All right, kid, let’s get you to bed.”

Skye is nearly dead weight as May hauls her to her feet, but she goes willingly enough, directing May to the correct bedroom. It’s spare and relatively undecorated, with little more than a laptop on the carpet next to an air mattress and clothes all over the floor. May lowers Skye onto the bed and pulls off the girl’s equally nasty shoes, tossing them by the door and moving to tug off Skye’s sick-splattered jeggings next.

“Whoa there,” Skye says, batting at her hands. “You haven’t even bought me dinner yet.”

“I would do this for any drunk friend,” May says with a roll of her eyes. “You don’t want this nastiness in your bed.”

“Now I wish I’d worn cute underwear,” the girl giggles, squirming as May works her jeans over her hips.

“Oh, shut up,” May says, tossing the pants over on the floor with the shoes. “You’re the one who has to wash them later.”

She finds a pair of yoga pants on the floor and helps Skye into them, unable to ignore the scars across the girl’s thighs and how relatively fresh they seem compared to how they will look in six years…

“I’ve been dreaming about you undressing me, you know,” Skye murmurs sleepily, smiling through hooded lids. “Not quite in these circumscrip—circus—ugh, I’m drunk…”

“Yes,” May agrees, prying Skye’s arms out of her corduroy blazer. “Gonna have a hell of a hangover tomorrow.”

Skye groans and sinks into the pillow as Melinda tugs the garment out from beneath her and lets her fall back into the mattress. “And you won’t be here to take care of me anymore…”

“The other side of the drinking coin,” May reminds her. “Gotta pay your dues for your fun.”

Skye’s shirt seems to be clean enough, so May doesn’t bother changing it, just rolls the girl over to one side of the bed and folds the duvet over her.

“Bread and water in the morning, Skye,” May recommends as she stands and turns out the light. “And don’t take any painkillers until you have food in your stomach.”

“Are you leaving?” Skye asks urgently as May shifts towards the door.

May pauses. She hadn’t really thought through what to do once Skye was safely home.

“I guess not,” she eventually answers, looking towards Skye in the dark.
“I mean, I know you will eventually, you always leave, but can you come lie down with me until then?”

The words, true as they are, bite at May as she closes the bedroom door and climbs carefully onto the flimsy mattress to lie down beside the girl. Once she’s near enough, Skye gropes for her hand in the dark, pulling May closer. May turns on her side and wraps one arm around the girl’s waist, tucking her other arm up as a pillow, since Skye is using the only one on the bed. For a few minutes, May holds the girl silently, waiting for the sounds of Skye drifting off to an unconscious sleep, but after a few minutes, she glances at her face to find her staring intensely at her in the dark.

“You can sleep,” May mutters, squeezing Skye’s side gently.

But the girl shakes her head, shifting closer. Her breath is rancid, and May turns her head away.

“I don’t want to miss you while you’re still here,” Skye whispers, resting her forehead on May’s shoulder. “You’re always leaving.”

Staring at the ceiling, May bites her lip and hates herself more. “But I always come back,” she says, not sure if she’s telling Skye or herself.

“And always leave…” Skye breathes, her words getting softer.

She grips Skye tighter.

“And I always come back…”

When Melinda suddenly appears back in her own hotel room, the burner phone in her duffel is ringing. She doesn’t get to it before it goes to voicemail, but when she flips open the phone, she sees that she has five missed calls from a familiar number.

She dials quickly.

“Mom?” she says when her mother picks up halfway through the first ring. “What’s happened?”

“Mei Qiaolian,” her mother’s voice cuts through the distance. “Your father’s been in an accident.”

**Daisy:**

“Fish oil. Really?”

It’s been three weeks since they got their first report of a very public “disturbance” out on the west coast that had everything in common with what Daisy understands about terragenisis. An older man had vanished out of his home in the middle of the night, and the next morning, his wife had found the remains of some kind of “shell” in their bathroom. Even though the police report clearly lacked the vocabulary for it, Daisy could tell it was the same thing she and Raina had once come out of in a Kree temple. The man had never been found, but SHIELD agents had been sent in (disguised as FBI agents) to search his home and interrogate his family.

A week later, another report had floated up from Vancouver—another disappearance, another empty husk. This time, there had been significant damage to the home, as though the woman’s powers had been of the more destructive variety. Once again, she had disappeared without a trace, and SHIELD agents had followed up with her home and life that she left behind.
So far, they had only been able to find one thing the two people had in common: the same brand of fish oil pills in their bathroom cabinets.

“The working theory is that it’s related to the case of crystals you pushed into the Pacific back on the Iliad,” the scientist running the meeting says. “We’ve traced the origins of the pills, and they were manufactured at the same plant on the same day, possibly even processed from the same catch of fish. We checked the records and found that it was a Pacific catch from March, almost two months after the crystals went into the sea.”

Daisy stares dumbly at the scientist whose name she doesn’t quite remember, trying to fit her head around the concept.

“So what you’re saying is, you think the pills contain oil from fish that swam in the water with the crystals then got caught and made into pills?” she says slowly.

The man looks equally unconvinced. “Again, it’s a working theory. We obviously will run some experiments to see if it’s even possible—none of our team has done any testing on the recovered terragin crystals yet.”

Daisy still shakes her head disbelievingly. “I transformed with a blast from a crystal in a Kree temple that no one can access anymore. How could a few doses of fish oil produce the same effect in a person?”

“It hardly seems like the most important question right now, doesn’t it?” another scientist chimes in, looking annoyed. “We’re inventing science on a daily basis in this organization. This is our only lead so far. Do we have your approval to experiment with the crystals, Director?”

Daisy looks towards Coulson, who has had a grim look on his face this whole time. He nods, still fidgeting with the prosthetic hand that Fitz just fitted him with yesterday.

“I don’t think I need to remind you to be extremely careful, Nathanson,” Coulson says with a firm look at the lead scientist. “Maximum safety gear, controlled environments, et cetera. And feel free to experiment with my old hand, too, if there’s a chance it would help you understand this transformation better.”

The scientists scatter soon after that, and Daisy pushes her rolling chair back from the conference table.

“Thanks for backing me up, boss,” she grumbles, turning to go.

“I haven’t dismissed you yet, Daisy,” Coulson calls from behind her, rising from his chair. “I still need to meet with you in my office.”

She follows him upstairs, trying to guess what else they have to talk about, but she’s more than a little surprised to see Mack in Coulson’s office when she gets there.

“Hey you!” she says, raising a brow. “Did Trip finally give you leave from the Iliad?”

“He’s holding down the fort just fine out there,” Mack says with a shrug. “I’m here because the big man called me back to this base.”

“Yes. I’ve asked you both to be here so that we can talk about the future,” Coulson says as he shuts the door behind himself and Daisy. The three of them remain standing, forming a confused triangle.

“I don’t want to think about it probably any more than the two of you do,” their director says,
crossing his arms, “but I’m afraid that what we’ve been seeing with the transformations on the west coast could be just the beginning of a trend that’s only going to grow. We can contact the manufacturers and get this product recalled as quickly as possible, but there is a good chance that the effects will ripple for a while. On top of that, we don’t know what effects this could be having on other sea life, what effect it might have on the water itself…”

“Sir,” Daisy begins, but he waves her off.

“Again, I want to be wrong. But in the event that I’m not, I need us to be ready for the next time a change like this happens to a person who wasn’t ready for it. Agents Mackenzie and Johnson, I’m putting you both in charge of a new team—the Inhuman Response Squad.”

“The IRS?” Mack repeats, looking unamused. “Really?”

“Feel free to change the name,” Coulson says, turning towards his desk and picking up two tablet computers, “but your job is simple. I want us to be ready to intercept an Inhuman as soon as they break out of their cocoon, or whatever we’re calling that shell they come out of. Before anyone gets hurt, or arrested, or attacked out of fear, we need to be there ready to protect them and get them to a safe place.”

He hands them each a tablet displaying a few spreadsheets.

“I’ve allotted funds, and the two of you can go over them together and give me more specifics as soon as possible. The Zephyr should be done within the month, and then we can be airborne again, but it’s not too late for us to put in some modifications in preparation for this. I know Fitz is still only half in the project, but he can at least delegate assignments to the engineering team while he keeps working on getting Simmons back. Bobbi, I’m sure, is available to rally the bio team for anything you need.”

Daisy looks slowly through the information, still trying to absorb everything he’s just said. Mack, however, seems more certain of what he wants to say.

“Sir,” he begins, shifting on his feet. “I think I’ve made my feelings about this kind of thing quite clear. I realize that SHIELD is going to be involved in stuff like this no matter what I say, but I’d prefer that it stayed at least fifteen miles away from me.”

“Your position is exactly why I want you with Daisy on this,” Coulson says. “I think a lot of you Mack, and one thing you’ve demonstrated consistently in the past year is your ability to be objective and to hold the lines you’ve chosen. That’s the kind of voice we need to be very loud around here these days.”

*And the kind of steadiness Daisy needs in her life again.*

He doesn’t say it out loud, but Daisy hears it anyway.

“I want a preliminary outline for our new ‘Welcome Wagon’ protocol in my inbox by tomorrow night,” Coulson orders, opening his office door and gesturing them through it. “If you have any questions, figure it out. Now get to work.”

Daisy floats out of the office behind Mack, but they don’t speak until they’re down in the common area together, standing awkwardly with the tablets in their hands.

“So, partner,” Mack finally says, offering her a kind expression that gives her a little bit of hope. “Where do we start?”
Things slowly come together over the next few weeks. They get a pod built for the Zephyr that can adapt to the powers of whatever enhanced individual occupies it and finish a wing of rooms with the same ability in one of the less-used basement levels. She programs news scanners and police scanners to monitor for any Inhuman-sounding activity.

As much as she hates the thought of seeing May’s ex on a regular basis, she agrees that they need a shrink on call, and he’s still the safest option. Still, Daisy asks Coulson to be the one to call Dr. Garner and ask for his commitment to assisting with their Secret Warrior initiative.

“He said he would help,” Coulson tells her when Daisy follows up with him a few days later. “I went ahead and sent over some of the Afterlife literature on the Inhumans so that he could start briefing himself.”

“Cool,” Daisy says with a nod. “Anything he can do to get ready.”

She and Mack but heads repeatedly as they talk through procedures and plans for how to approach someone going through what she did when she changed—how to be truthful but not unnecessarily terrifying, how to be safe without being scary.

“Look, it’s all well and good to want minimal weapons and armor so we don’t intimidate the Acquisition,” Mack says in response to one of her suggestions, “and they may not be necessary for encounters with some powers, but what if the Inhuman has powers less like Raina’s and more like yours, Tremors?”

“I was scared enough of myself when I changed,” Daisy reminds him, thinking of those first terrible days in Quarantine right after Puerto Rico. “Being scared of everyone else around you is the only thing that can make something like that worse.”

“Were you scared of the strangers around you when you got spirited off to Afterlife?” he asks, and Daisy thinks of the first person she saw there, the one who called himself her ‘transitioner’.

“No—I was confused, but the way they seemed to know what they were doing made me feel a little less afraid,” she says. “You and I are making this up as we go, though. If I were a person going through my earthquake transition and the two of us showed up, I wouldn’t trust me.”

“Did any of those people survive the conflict back in January?” Mack asks carefully, and Daisy nods, wondering why she didn’t think of Lincoln sooner.

“I’m not sure where he is now, but I could try to track him down,” she says slowly. “See if he has any advice to offer.”

She starts her search in Ohio, where he had said he was from. It doesn’t take her more than three minutes to find him—he hasn’t changed his name—but it takes her a few hours to work up the courage to dial his listed number.

“Hello?” he answers, tone quizzical, when the call connects.

“Lincoln, it’s me,” she says quietly. “Daisy.”

He says nothing in response, and a second later, the call disconnects. Daisy sighs and lowers the phone from her ear, then leans back in her chair and stares at the ceiling, wondering why she expected any different.
July rolls around with its usual humid misery, and though Daisy doesn’t mention anything to anyone on July second, she can’t keep its significance off her mind. They go through their usual routines that day—training, meetings, tests, drills—and Daisy still feels the absence of May and Jemma in every meeting they should be in and space they should be filling, but it’s more of an echo than a stabbing truth.

The Zephyr is finally airborne, showing good results with its test flights. The Inhuman-ready escape pod and rooms in the base are still under construction, but they’re due to start testing them next week. Fitz has been AWOL on occasion, and Bobbi hints that she knows where he is but is willing to cover for him if it means they may get Jemma back.

Daisy still hasn’t resigned herself to the possibility that she might not see her friend again, but they’ve got work to do.

On Jemma’s birthday last year, the scientist had been undercover in Hydra, but Skye had wanted to do something special for her anyway. So she’d interrogated Fitz to find out what kind of cake Jemma would have requested, had it made, and then hauled their diminished Bus family into a video that she could send to Jemma on a secure channel later.

If nothing else, she wanted Jemma to know how much they missed her.

Daisy jumps when she hears the rooftop door creak open behind her, but she manages to hold onto her bottle as she looks towards the door where Coulson’s bald spot glints gold in the light from the stairwell.

“Well, I should have known this wouldn’t be my private drinking spot forever,” her director says, a smile audible in his voice as he steps out onto the roof with her.

“It’s okay, I can go,” Daisy says quickly, attempting to climb to her feet from where she’s been hunched against the low wall that edges the flat roof, but he waves off her effort as he approaches.

“Don’t worry, it’s nicer to have someone to talk to.”

Coulson seems far more familiar with his prosthetic as he sits down beside her on the rough shingles and pops the cap on his own bottle without the aid of a bottle opener.

“It’s one of the only times it’s worth being outside in July,” he comments, looking in the same direction as her—up at the stars. “When the sun’s on the literal opposite side of the earth.”

“Yeah,” Daisy agrees mindlessly, still gazing at the stars.

“What are you thinking about?” Coulson asks, and she feels him looking expectantly at her from her shoulder.

“Who do you think I’m thinking about?” Daisy asks, looking pointedly over at him.

“Fair enough,” Coulson says, facing the stars again.

The two of them drink in silence for what feels like a long time, and Daisy eventually sighs, setting her empty bottle on the sandy shingle beside her.

“On my last birthday, May took me out to dinner in Memphis, basically our first real date. And then she flew us out to an observatory in the desert so that she could show me the gift she got me—a star.”
Daisy has the proof on her, had been looking at the star chart, trying to remember how to find it, and now she unfolds the paper again, offering it to Coulson in the dark.

“She said that I wouldn’t be able to see it without a telescope, but that it would always be up there. Something permanent in the universe that I could call mine.”

“That’s quite a gift,” Coulson says, smiling slightly in the starlight as he uses a flashlight in one finger of the fake hand to read the paper. “Setting the bar pretty high for every subsequent birthday.”

“The birthday before that, we were in Utah,” Daisy says, taking the paper when he offers it back to her and sticking it under her bottle. “That’s when you told me you wanted me to watch the way SHIELD approached powered people. Feels like another lifetime. It’s kind of unbelievable to be sitting here now, inventing new SHIELD protocols for that on a daily basis.”

“You were good at that then, but think of how much you’ve grown since then,” Coulson reminds her. “I know you’ll be really good at this now.”

Daisy sighs, putting her head back against the wall and closing her eyes.

*And the birthday before that…*

“I’m not missing the hints, Daisy,” Coulson says then, tapping his bottle gently against her empty one. She opens her eyes and peers over at him quizzically. He’s smiling gently.

“I looked at your file when you updated it with your birth name—I saw what else you added that day.”

He sets his bottle down and presses a hidden button on his prosthetic. “Okay, Bobbi,” he says towards the back of his hand. “That’s your cue.”

“Coulson, what—“ is all Daisy gets out before the rooftop door creaks open again and a few more figures emerge, the leader bearing a plate with two hands.

“Happy birthday to you…” Bobbi is singing, backed up by Mack, Hunter, and even Fitz, as well as a handful of other scientists and specialists.

Stunned and overwhelmed, Daisy doesn’t even move as the small crowd approaches her, and Bobbi kneels carefully on her good knee, lit up from beneath by the candles stuck in a round, messily decorated birthday cake.

“Happy birthday dear Daisy…” she sings with a knowing smile, “Happy birthday to you!”

The others clap and whoop, but Daisy continues to just stare disbelievingly at the group until eventually Hunter pokes her outstretched foot with his toe.

“This is usually where the birthday girl makes a wish and saves the cake from a wax job, sister,” he says, nodding at the cake in Bobbi’s hands. “And since Bob baked it, you’d better try to preserve it from any other horrors you can.”

“Thanks, Hunter,” the blonde says with narrowed eyes, but Daisy sees the softness in her smile.

“Make a wish, Daisy,” Coulson says, nudging her with his elbow, and Daisy finally moves, leaning forward.

What’s the one thing I always wanted?
Instead of taking a deep breath, she raises her hand and puts it close to the candles.

*Hope I’m as good at this as I think I am…*

The tiny burst of air she sends over the tiny flames is enough to snuff them out… and send the candles toppling into the frosting. The group bursts into cheers and laughter, and Daisy finally grins, forcing herself to speak, to exclaim over the cake and the surprise like she’s supposed to, to wrap Bobbi in a hug and laugh at the uneven frosting with her while the others help cut slices and pass them around. Trip is there too, another great surprise, and Daisy launches herself at him in a four-limbed hug that she’s so glad to have returned. But even as more beers and cake slices are passed around and the people she loves mingle and hug her and wish her the best for her twenty-seventh year, Daisy can’t ignore the absence of the person she didn’t let herself wish for and the person she did.

*I wish we found Jemma,* she repeats, looking up at the stars again. *I wish we knew how to get her back.*

Over the following weeks, her scanners occasionally pick up news that sounds like Inhuman terragenesis, and their team mobilizes as quickly as possible, only to arrive on site and be unable to locate the Inhuman.

“The feds were just here,” a shop owner says on the third of such occasions. His parking lot still has a few overturned cars—it isn’t yet clear how the Inhuman had done it though. “They shot him with some kind of stun gun and took him away in a truck.”

Back at base, they have a new group to search for.

“I don’t think it’s Hydra,” Hunter says as they round-table in Coulson’s office that day. “That beast has gone quiet—*eerily* quiet—since Sokovia.”

“And the known Hydra accounts that we monitor aren’t moving any money—this could be a third party we aren’t on top of yet,” Coulson adds.

Daisy hacks the local cameras for images of the Inhuman appearance and grabs a few faces from the footage of the agency’s arrival. She sets them running through her other search programs, and by the next evening, they have a few matches to the same face.

“She’s got three different aliases, but I’m 92% sure that they’re all her,” she says as she shows her results to Coulson. “See if you can get some better pictures of this lady the next time we cross paths.”

Daisy camps out in Bobbi’s room that evening, scrolling idly on her laptop while Bobbi lies on her yoga mat doing her rehab stretches on the floor. Jemma is still missing, and Fitz has disappeared once again, off on some other self-assigned mission chasing down a lead in the Middle East.

“Can I ask you something?” Bobbi asks suddenly as she works through a few bicycle crunches, and Daisy rolls towards the edge of the bed, looking down at her expectantly.

“You found the location of a lady who works for three secret organizations in less than a day,” Bobbi says, not pausing in her exercises. “So why haven’t you tried tracking May down?”

Daisy sighs, laying her head on her folded arms. “I have. She’s in Sun City, Arizona. She’s with her dad, I think.”

“Wait, seriously?” Bobbi says, now sitting up on her mat. “You know where she is, and you didn’t
“say anything? Did you try to contact her?”

Daisy sighs again. “If she wanted to talk to any of us, she knows where we are. Our numbers haven’t changed. That means she’s staying away because she wants to. There’s no reason to try to drag her back in if she doesn’t want to come.”

“I’m not talking about bringing her back to SHIELD,” Bobbi says, climbing off the floor and sitting down on the bed beside Daisy. “I’m talking about you finally getting the chance to talk about what happened back in January and clear the air.”

“No,” Daisy says, rolling onto her back and meeting Bobbi’s eyes. “Coulson was right. She deserves to make her own choices—she doesn’t get that many. When she met me, I was already in love with her, and I’ve run myself in circles before, wondering if she would have fallen in love with me if our future hadn’t already been set in stone somewhere in my past. Sometimes, I convince myself that things would have always happened the way they happened, but some days, I feel like she got pigeonholed into the life we had together but wouldn’t have chosen it for herself.”

Bobbi shakes her head, mouth pulling into a slight smile. “Daisy, do you really think you could make Melinda May do anything she didn’t want to do? Including loving you?”

Daisy smiles at that. “No, probably not. What I mean, though, is…if May comes back, I want it to be because she chose to. Not because I’m there, hauling her into orbit and hanging onto her because I want her to stay.”

“Orbit?” Bobbi repeats, raising a brow.

“Comets and stars, remember?” Daisy says, closing her eyes. “It’s not a perfect metaphor, but it works for us.”

She thinks of the closest thing she and May had to vows --If it's in my power, then I’ll stay, as long as you want me to. And when I do have to go, I promise to always come back--and the admitted flaws in them, and she guesses it must be a sign of progress that it hurts a tiny bit less today than it did the last time she thought about that era.

*That was the best she could promise.*

*So can I hold her to the promise that she'll always come back?*

Life goes on. She still misses May and Jemma like limbs, but the world is still turning, still changing. They do what they’re supposed to do—try to get ready to be the first responders to the weirder world.

And then one day, they are ready at the right moment, and they meet a man named Joey Gutierrez.

**May:**

She’s been staying with her father for over five months when Lance Hunter shows up at their door.

“I suppose I should have seen a greeting like that coming,” he says as they sit down on the back patio together, the knife she had held at his throat now safely back on the cutting board with the unfinished meal prep. “Still, I had thought you and I ended on friendly enough terms.”

“What are you doing here, Hunter?” she growls, leveling him with an unamused stare.
“Well, I’m sure you knew someone was going to track you down sooner or later,” he says lightly. “Though I suppose you were expecting someone else to be the one to turn up at your door.”

She had been expecting needles and barbs from him, and their absence puts her even more on edge, wondering what he already knows.

“You hear about Simmons gone missing?” Hunter asks, sounding genuinely concerned.

She nods. “Coulson and I spoke on the phone last month.”

“I know. We traced it. Payphone at LAX, one of the surviving few.”

“We’re not at LAX,” she responds, raising a careful brow.

“Oh come now, May,” Hunter says, almost patronizingly. “Daisy’s known where you are for months.”

“Daisy?” May repeats, needing a moment to realize who he’s referring to.

“You know, your girlfriend that you bailed on without a word of explanation?” Hunter says, sounding something between disgusted and perplexed. “She changed her name a few months ago, wants everyone to call her by her birth name now. Though you might know that if you’d called her at least once.”

Those words do sting, but May only narrows her eyes. “Did she send you?”

But he shakes his head. “No. No one at SHIELD knows I’m here.”

“Then what do you want, Hunter?” she asks impatiently.

“Your skills,” he answers, surprising her. “I plan to put Ward six feet underground, at the least. Coulson and SHIELD can’t really spare the time at the moment, so I’m on my own, not affiliated with them. Could really use an extra pair of experienced and determined hands, though.”

May folds her arms across her chest, confused by how insulted she is by this request. “I’m a little busy taking care of my dad right now.”

Hunter makes a sympathetic face. “Yeah, I heard he was in a car accident—broke his hip. Police called it a hit and run. But it looks like Mr. May’s doing okay to me,” he says, glancing towards the house, where May is fairly confident her father is standing at the back door, watching them.

“He’s getting there,” she admits.

Hunter turns his gaze backton her. “But they never found the driver.”

She glances away, thinking again of that horrifying night when her mother had called her in Hawaii, how she’d been able to get on the first flight out the next morning and had hated every second she had to wait before she could turn her phone on again as they landed in California…

Her mother had already arrived in Arizona too by the time May made it to Sun City. Her father had still been in surgery, and they’d sat anxiously together in the ER waiting room. Melinda had been unable to stop thinking of the last time she’d stood and waited like this for someone she cared about…how it had been the same person, ten years or two months apart, another lifetime already…

Hunter finally leans forward, resting his arms on the table.
“Part of you wonders if it was Ward, doesn’t it?” he says, holding her gaze. “Going after the people you care about? We both know he’s capable of it. And unless I’m off the mark, he’s out there pumping new life into Hydra. And we both know where he’ll come looking first.”

She stares at him in silence for a moment, realizing that the last time she’d seen Hunter was when they were both trying desperately to keep Bobbi alive on the flight back from Spain, where May had made the play that got Agent 33 killed by Ward himself.

That bastard already had plenty of reasons to hate me.

But that might have been enough to move me to the top of his list.

Hunter eventually sighs, leaning back in his chair.

“Look, I’m not here to try and persuade you to come back to SHIELD—I’m just asking if you want to help me end this monster once and for all. For all he’s done to your team, to your friends…”

…to Daisy…

She grits her teeth. “I walked away from all this for a reason.”

“I’m sure you’ve got reasons,” Hunter says with a shrug. “I’m sure you think they’re good ones. Seems to me, though, that you haven’t walked too far. Calling a lot of the same people I’ve been looking up, trying to sniff out the state of Hydra, answering the door with a knife in your hand…and I see you haven’t gotten rid of all of Daisy’s clothes yet.”

May has enough dignity to not glance down at the chambray shirt she’s wearing. It may have once been Skye’s, in that Skye was the one who had purchased it, but their wardrobes had overlapped almost entirely after a year of living together, and May hadn’t been paying much attention to what went in her bag when she hastily left the base back in January.

That’s what she’s been telling herself, anyway.

Hunter pulls a slip of paper from his pocket and slides it across the table towards her.

“I’m going to nab a payload off some of these gun-runners tomorrow night to establish my cover. If you change your mind, you can find me there.”

He stands, but May remains sitting, still glowering.

“You can show yourself out the gate,” she says with a pointed nod in its direction.

He nods, but she knows he’ll still have the last word.

“Whatever your reasons for walking away, you can never be truly out if you’re always looking over your shoulder. And next time, it probably won’t be me outside the window.”

He leaves, and she waits until she hears the sound of his car starting up and then driving away. She eventually goes back inside and finishes preparing the dinner she had been working on before, and when they finally sit down at the table together, her father, who has been persistently needling her all day, is direct as ever.

“You went through another breakup, didn’t you?” he says, gazing at her from her elbow. “Who was it? Did you and Coulson finally decide to stop dragging your feet?”

“Ba…” Melinda begins, rolling her eyes even as she calls him by the Chinese syllable that usually
“Fine, you don’t have to tell me the details, but you can’t keep hiding out here in the desert forever. That isn’t the woman I raised.”

She wants to protest, *I'm not hiding,* but there’s no point in kidding herself anymore—she’s been hiding since January. Instead, she digs into her food and says nothing.

“I’m right about the breakup, though, aren’t I?” he says, eyeing her knowingly as she focuses on her plate. “You went through another split, and now you feel damaged, so you’re hiding out here, licking your wounds?”

“The split was the last thing in a long list of bad things that happened all at once,” she says, deciding she can tell him at least that much. “I don’t want to talk about it.”

“And are all those things reasons that you can’t go back to SHIELD now?” he asks.

Melinda says nothing, and eventually, her father gives up, eating the rest of their dinner in silence.

Later that evening, though, he brings out a box of mementos like a peace offering, and they sit on the sofa together, looking through old pictures and trinkets while the summer dusk finally fades to night.

“You didn’t take those skates off for five years,” her father says at one point, holding up a photo of eleven-year-old her at an ice-skating competition. “Do you ever miss it?”

Melinda thinks of the pair of ice skates that must be collecting dust in her closet back at the Playground.

“It was a long time ago,” she says, taking the picture from him. “Maybe I miss the simpler times more than I miss the skating itself. That ice is pretty unforgiving when you fall on it.”

“Falling teaches you how not to do it,” her father reminds her, and Melinda can tell from the look in his eyes that her lecture is finally coming.

She stares down at her past spread out on the coffee table and grits her teeth.

“You’re forty-six now, Melinda; you aren’t a child,” he says, folding his arms and turning slightly towards her on the sofa. “But you are my child, and I know this isn’t you.”

She shakes her head, pursing her lips for a moment. “What if it is, Dad? What if this is like Bahrain, and I can’t go back to being the person I was before all this mess happened?”

“No one’s the same person after a bad night of sleep—I certainly don’t expect you to be the same person after a trauma. But I also know what’s important to you.” He sounds so certain that she finally looks over at him, absorbing the sincerity in his gaze. “You put yourself behind a desk for five years, but you obviously got back out on the field eventually. You need time to get through something hard, I won’t fault you for that. But I can tell that you have unfinished business, and all you’re doing right now is making excuses.”

“I just want to try and have a normal life, Dad,” she says weakly, a half-truth. “I wanted to see if I can.”

“Your time-traveling adult self has been visiting since you were five, Mellie. You’ve been time-traveling for nearly a decade now. ‘Normal’ isn’t something that will ever be in the cards for you.”

She knows this. She’s known it since she was twelve. But it startles her how much it hurts to hear
her father say it.

And now I’m the age of the oldest Jiejie I’ve met...

“You’re worried about me because you’ve got an enemy out there with his gunsights on your back?” he says, leaning forward until they’re both hunched similarly. “Well, that won’t go away unless you do something about it. You’ve never been the kind of person who does nothing, and I’ll certainly be fine without you cooking and berating me to do my PT day in and day out."

He slides over the skating photo again.

“You remember the pain when you hit the ice. But I always remembered how quickly you would get up.”

Melinda purses her lips. “I was a kid. It didn’t hurt as much then.”

Her dad’s silence feels a lot louder than the words that follow it. “My daughter always got back up.”

He leaves her after that, heading off towards his bedroom without saying goodnight, but she remains on the sofa for a while longer, staring at the past.

From a few corners of the room, other photos of herself, or herself and her father, even a few of her with both her parents in better times, smile at her. Parents both present and persistent, a blessing Skye never got to have.

Because of me.

Melinda puts her head back on the sofa, pressing down on the crushing regret and self-loathing that still grips her chest at least once every day, trying to focus on the few things that she can know are true.

You don’t deserve to have that life back.

SHIELD will manage without you.

Skye deserves a chance to be with a family that loves her without you ruining it again.

But you can still do some good without SHIELD.

You’re capable. You’re expendable. And the world will be a safer place without him.

What else really matters?

First, though, you need to pack.

She leaves the photo of herself on the table as she stands and flips off the lamp, following the beacon of gold light down the short hallway to the guest bedroom where she’s been sleeping during her time here. She’s only three steps from the doorway, however, when a shadow interrupts the light for a moment.

Intruder, her mind screams at her, and then, almost in the same space of a second, Ward.

Melinda freezes, her heart rate kick-starting her fight-or-flight response as her mind quickly rolls through her options.

Yell to Dad to warn him or back away and go get him out of the house yourself or try to sneak closer
and jump the intruder plan to use the bedside lamp it’s heavy or race in and hope for surprise and then shout to Dad or maybe back away and call 911…

Too slow. You’re the first line right now, not the last one.

She takes a deep breath and another, carefully-silent step closer, then another until she can finally see into the bedroom, her hands itching for a better weapon than her fists and wondering if the intruder has already taken her gun that she left in the nightstand…

But then the shadow suddenly passes over her again, a figure interrupting the path of light from the lamp inside, and Melinda feels her breath stick in her chest.

It’s not Ward. Or Hunter, or any other agent, or even a Jiejie.

It’s a child.

A brown-haired girl, wrapped in the throw blanket that usually lies over the foot of the guest bed, padding over the carpet on bare feet and dropping quickly to her knees beside the dresser and opening the bottom drawer and pawing through the contents.

Nothing about the scene makes any sense at all, so all of her plans evaporate on the spot. Instead, Melinda takes a final step into the doorway to block the exit and says, very loudly,

“Hey.”

Gasping audibly, the child topples over into the dresser as she both spins and jumps from a kneeling position. Melinda remains stiffly where she stands as the girl clutches the blanket closer around herself as she turns around fully, peering up at her through a mess of long, dark hair. The shock on the child’s face lasts barely a second, and then she’s scrambling to her feet, brown eyes bright.

Dark hair and brown eyes.

Like Katya.

Like Skye.

This child is neither, but the similarities make Melinda’s heart rate double down as the child takes a fearless step towards her, and she lays one hand on the knob of the door, ready to hurl it closed between them.

“Who are you and what are you doing?” Melinda asks firmly, forcing herself to stare the child down.

The girl halts on the carpet, confusion puckering her brow. Her hands remain hidden, tucked inside the blanket as she blinks up at Melinda.

“You know me,” the child says instead of answering, biting her lip nervously.

Melinda stares hard at the child’s face, reassuring herself that she’s wrong.

Not Katya.

Not Skye.

“I don’t,” she says firmly.

One hand slips towards the phone in her back pocket.
Maybe 911 is actually the best option…

The child’s eyes flick down, as if registering the movement, then over to the small, bank-issue calendar that sits on the desk beside her.

“Oh,” the girl says then, sounding disappointed. “I think I’m too early.”

And suddenly, there’s the sound of air rushing in to fill an empty space, and the blanket collapses to the floor, empty.
This felt like a filler chapter to me, but I didn't want to hop over too much of the events that led to May coming back to SHIELD, Jemma getting back to Earth, and Lincoln joining up with the team.

**September 10, 2015—Daisy is 27, May is 46**

**Daisy:**

Of all the things she was expecting to make approaching Inhumans difficult, a monster hunting them down blasting holes through them wasn’t one of them.

She’s watched the security footage from the hospital on repeat since the night she and Lincoln sent the creature crumbling through the floor to a lower level, and it still seems impossible. The thing is human-shaped but significantly bigger than any normal person in both height and width. Besides that, he has some kind of lion-mane situation of dreads and a strangely-shaped face.

Oh, and the ability to bore holes in people with his hands—pretty distinguishing feature.

“**Tell me where to find the Inhuman!**” she’d heard the creature snarl as he’d blasted into the hospital where Lincoln worked.

*Correct speech—human or advanced alien, not a mindless monster. And besides that, he was wearing shoes and trousers…*

“You’d think something like that would have been spotted and reported at least once by now,” she comments as she sets new filters on her police scanners to pull words like “monster”, “demon”, “alien”, “creature” to the front of her queue. “Why have we not heard anything about him before?”

“That thing’s taller than me,” Mack agrees. “Even without the dreads and bone structure, he’d stand out in a crowd.”

“He could be able to conceal himself—maybe that’s his other superpower,” Daisy speculates.

“If he could do that, why would he go around like a monster at all?”

“Maybe his chest-drilling powers only work when he looks like a Rasta-hulk,” Daisy guesses, exasperation in her voice. “You got any better ideas?”

“Look whatever it is, it was able to walk right through both you and Sparky doing your absolute best,” Mack says, looking, not for the first time, completely rattled by this fact. “I thought you were the biggest gun out there before—now, someone else just got an upgrade, and you might not be able to stand up to him the next time we cross paths.”

“That’s exactly why I need to find him before he finds anyone else,” Daisy says through gritted teeth, bowing over her laptop again. “We can’t let him run free if he’s capable of—and doing—
On the table beside them, Mack’s phone vibrates with their Director’s name appearing on the screen.

“Coulson?” Mack answers as he brings the phone to his ear.

Daisy strains to hear the other side of the conversation, but she can only hear Mack’s responses.

“What exactly are we bringing, sir?”

Another beat of silence, and then Mack closes his eyes tiredly.

“Send us the coordinates,” he says, dragging a hand down his face. “We’ll be there soon, boss.”

He ends the call and meets Daisy’s eyes.

“You go supervise packing up the Monolith, I’m going to go get the plane ready,” he says as he stands. “Fitz and the team found something—so we’ve gotta get that thing to England.”

May:

She had been pretty confident of her decision when she left her father’s home in Sun City, but May would be lying if she said she didn’t regret agreeing to this mission on an almost minute-by-minute basis.

Hunter is good at his job, taking the gun payload entirely without her help before she turns up at the warehouse late that evening, but he’s still the same person she’s generally avoided as much as possible for the past year and a half: chatty, self-absorbed, and occasionally whinier than a toddler. Makes for a very long road trip as they move the guns across the country.

They cover the distance between California and Oklahoma on a single, long day of driving, and at least a dozen times, May considers leaving her passenger on the side of the road in the desert, possibly impaled on a cactus. The only thing assisting her self-control is the fact that she can tell he’s intentionally trying to torment her—he just can’t seem to see how much it hurts to listen to him talk about all that she’s missed in the past seven months.

“Coulson’s been doing the best out of anyone, I think,” Hunter says on Arizona I-40 mile 128 as the sun comes up over the desert. “Still likes his job, built a new plane, got everyone organized and everything running acceptably again. Weaver and Trip are in charge of the Iliad now, and they work together a lot better than the Board ever did. Still trying to build the organization back up, still trying to stay undercover. Hard line to toe. Coulson’s got a robotic hand now too, thanks to Fitz.”

“Daisy chopped all her hair off sometime in the spring,” he says as they pass through Albuquerque. “Still does her thing with the earthquakes—been getting real good at it, too. She and Mack are running SHIELD’s Inhuman-response team now, and she and Bobbi have been spending a lot of time together since Simmons disappeared. I get barred from Bob’s room at least once a week so that they can have a slumber party. Her daddy dearest went through TAHITI protocol not long after you left, so he’s finally neutralized, as far as SHIELD’s concerned. Got him all set up with a vet practice in Milwaukee, I heard. I think Coulson took Daisy out to visit once, a few months back.”

“Bob had three surgeries on her lung, two on the knee,” he says as they cross the border into the Texas panhandle. “She’s been back on her feet for a couple of months now, rehabbing. Been
impatient as ever the whole time, but she’s getting better every day. It was just in the past few weeks she’s been able to run again.”

“Simmons got swallowed up by that rock back in March, and Fitz went a little off the rails for it. He’s been a madman, chasing down every possible lead, trying to find a way to get her back. Hard to watch—I think almost everyone else has nearly given her up for dead. He won’t hear it, though. Don’t think he’ll be satisfied until he sees her again, one way or another.”

May listens, unable to make herself curse him into silence. She wants to hear about the people she left, but she has to work hard to mask how rotten every update makes her feel.

You left.

_Things were harder than they’d ever been for that team, and you left without apology and didn’t come back. Things got worse, and you didn’t know because you cut them off like they didn’t matter._

_How do you think they feel about you now?_

“Has Fitz been able to admit that he’s in love with Simmons yet?” she eventually asks as they roll into Oklahoma, where they’ll switch drivers and he’ll take over for the night. Her voice actually sounds creaky from a day of disuse.

Hunter seems equally surprised by her question, but he recovers quickly and shrugs.

“He said as much to me and the other fellows over a year ago. Watching him now, you hardly need to hear him say it.”

“Everyone’s been nudging them towards each other since before I met them, but it seems more like all they’ve done is hurt over each other, one way or another.”

“Yeah, well clearly you don’t have to be in a relationship to break each other’s hearts,” Hunter says, stretching in his bucket seat. “That’s all love is after all, requited or not—risking the best and the worst possible outcomes the deeper you go. Horrible pain that you want again and again.”

Hunter’s prattling does taper off a bit throughout the next day, but it just results in May’s mind turning circles around the last thing that happened right before she left her father’s home.

_She said I should know her_, she repeats to herself again, still disbelieving. _And then she said she was too early and disappeared just like I do._

The only obvious explanation is time-travel, but Melinda still can’t let herself imagine it. For seven years, she had always assumed that she was the only one…

But there’s a terragin outbreak now, after all. These days, anything is possible.

They’ve made it nearly to the Great Lakes region with their stolen payload when she gets a call on her burner phone, the number no one but her parents is supposed to have. On the screen, though, a familiar number is waiting, and she guesses it must have been her mother who passed this number along to him.

“Yes?” she says cautiously as she brings the device to her ear.

“Your team pulled off a miracle today,” Andrew says quietly. “Fitz got Simmons back.”
September 17, 2015

Daisy:

“I killed someone.”

They’ve been trying to track him down for days, ever since the ATCU issued the nationwide search for him and put his face on every public channel. Mack and Coulson’s ill-fated tracker plan, along with her dud of a phone call, had been no help whatsoever besides letting them know what state he was in. Now, it seems like the whole situation may have pushed him to his breaking point.

“What happened?” she demands, racing through the halls with her phone pressed soundly to her ear, afraid to lose the call for even a second.

“I called an old friend that I knew I could count on,” Lincoln says shakily in her ear. “He must have been watching the news though, because he got scared and was trying to bar me from leaving—he said he’d called the hotline…”

*The ATCU alien threat hotline…* Daisy thinks, remembering the banner she’d seen running for the past few days on all major news channels. *Throwing fuel on the paranoia fire…*

“He had a bat, and I blasted it out of his hands, trying to leave…” Lincoln goes on, “but…I don’t know, maybe he has a pacemaker that I didn’t know about, maybe…” His voice breaks a little. “He just collapsed. And I tried shocking him to get his heart going again, but I couldn’t bring him back.”

“Where are you?” she says as calmly as possible, finding Coulson in the common area and waving him frantically over, catching Mack by his sleeve as he passes in the hall.

“Charlotte,” he says, then rattles off the address. “They’re almost here, Daisy. I’m going to go hide in the new development a few blocks east. You can come look for me there.”

The call goes dead, and Daisy shoves the phone back into her pocket, hastily recounting to Coulson and Mack what she’s just learned.

“The ATCU isn’t on my trust list,” Coulson says firmly. “We’re his best option right now. You two go handle his extraction—I’m going to go meet with their leader, see if we can talk this out.”

*Ah, the dragon lady from all the pictures. Best of luck.*

The quinjet flight is quick, and Daisy finds Lincoln exactly where he said he’d be. He looks completely rattled as he steps out of his hiding spot, like everything inside him is out of place, nothing like the person she’d met months ago at Afterlife. All the coolness and confidence are completely gone. He looks more like a cornered stray, still trying to decide whether to give up hope or make a last attempt for freedom.

“I killed him,” Lincoln says again in a hollow voice once she’s closed the door of the empty apartment behind her. “John. My friend. He saved my life more than once, and I couldn’t bring him back…”

He finally meets her eyes, and the despair in them breaks her heart. “Everything they say about me is true.”

Daisy wants to console, but lies don’t need coddling.

“Fine, they’re right,” she says, callously, shrugging off the fact. “You’re dangerous, I’m dangerous,
“but that’s not who you are!”

“You’re wrong—“ he says, shaking his head, seeming to sink further into despair.

“I know the real you, and—“

“You don’t!” he challenges, a warning edge in his voice, meeting her eyes again. “The man who killed his only friend, who has to be saved from himself over and over? That’s the real me. You know better than anyone—if everything around you crumbles, and you’re the cause…”

“Stop!” she cuts him off, taking a few steps across the unfinished floor. This feels too familiar… having to tell someone she cares about that she—he—isn’t the deserving root of all the ruin around her…

Why do I always pick the ones with self-loathing habits…

Birds of a feather, Daisy…

“You don’t see it, but I do,” she says firmly, still shifting slowly closer to him. “You help people because you’re meant to. You can do that with us. Like you were doing at the hospital—saving lives!”

“That part of my life is over,” he says dismissively, shaking his head and turning away.

“No,” she says firmly, now close enough to touch him, and she places her hands lightly on his arms. “You are not cursed. You are not some horrible thing. I know because you taught me that I wasn’t. Even before I met Jiaying, you convinced me that I had a purpose—that my life wasn’t over, but maybe just…getting somewhere. Please let me do the same for you.”

He hesitantly meets her eyes again, but it seems like he’s finally hearing her. “You’re wasting your time caring about me,” he says, and Daisy’s heart aches, because God, if she doesn’t know how it feels to believe that…how it hurts to love someone who thinks that…

“I can’t help it,” she whispers, reaching up to touch his face.

The kiss is brief, and Daisy doesn’t realize she’s doing it until it’s already happening, but she doesn’t immediately pull away. It’s…nice.

And it seems to convince him.

“I’ll go with you,” he says quietly when she draws back a little, “but I’m not agreeing to work with SHIELD.”

She nods, lingering close to him, almost sighing in relief. “We’ll figure it out together,” she promises.

There is a sound knock on the door, and she turns in time to see Mack enter, looking slightly uncomfortable.

Oh, yeah, he would have heard all that on the comms…

“Great,” she says as she steps quickly back from Lincoln, refusing to let herself blush. “Is the escape module on its way?

“Change of plans, he says grimly, just as armed agents rush in behind him. “Coulson’s orders. We’re turning him over to the ATCU.”
Lincoln, of course, does not go quietly, blasting a power surge into the carpet that jolts the soldiers off their feet, long enough for him to race out the door while Daisy and Mack cut off the rest of them. A few tense moments ensue as their gunsights turn on her instead, but then the leader—Banks—gets a phone call, and he eventually turns to Daisy with a sneer.

“I guess it’s your lucky day.” He turns to his men. “We’re done here. Let’s go.”

The agents move out, and Daisy races back to the plane with Mack, but it’s not until they get back to HQ that she hears anything from Coulson.

“You’d better have an excellent explanation for all that shit,” she says, planting herself firmly in front of him in his office and crossing her arms.

“It was not an easy decision,” he says calmly, but she sees a warning look in his eyes in response to her tone.

“To hand Lincoln over?” she demands, still dubious.

He shakes his head. “I had to make a choice—they have your picture, Daisy.”

This pulls her up short.

*For you. He gave up a stranger to protect you.*

She doesn’t know how to feel about that.

“So why didn’t they take me? Once Lincoln left, how did you convince them not to take me in?”

“I offered them something just as valuable—me. My expertise.”

Daisy gives him the most incredulous expression she can manage. “So, what, now we’re working with them?” she says, throwing up her hands.

“I’m done fighting with people over who gets to fight the real fight,” Coulson says, getting to his feet and make his way around his desk. “It’s a colossal waste of time and resources. I went against Talbot, I went against another faction of SHIELD. We know what we’re doing—they don’t. Hopefully they can learn from us.”

“It is hard to trust them when they are hunting people like me,” Daisy reminds him, crossing her arms once again, but Coulson meets her gaze carefully.

“I never said that I trust them. And for the record, May and I once said the same thing about you, when I first brought you onto the Bus. People can change, but they have to be given a chance.”

Her heart still does that skipping thing whenever another person mentions May’s name, and Daisy tries her best to not let her expression change. But then Coulson’s phone rings, and he checks the screen.

“It’s Rosalind,” he says, looking pointedly at Daisy.

“First name basis, huh?” she mutters, raising an eyebrow.

He responds with only a pointed nod to the door, and she turns away with a sigh.

“I’ll leave you to it.”
Mack is good sulking company for a while, distracting her with video games and his easy quiet, but when Daisy sees Fitz pass in the hallway with Jemma under his arm, returning from their dinner date that seems to be ending rather early, she waits only a minute before getting up following them towards the barracks.

It still seems unbelievable that Jemma is finally here again.

When she makes it to her hall, she sees Fitz turning from Jemma’s closed door, looking disappointed but mostly mad at himself, and when Daisy asks how it went, he just shrugs despairingly.

“I don’t know what happened. We were in the restaurant for barely a minute before she sort of…fell apart. Couldn’t stop crying. So we just left.”

“Oh God, Fitz. I’m sorry,” Daisy says, feeling his disappointment. “Did she say anything?”

Fitz shakes his head, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Nah, she ah, she couldn’t really talk. Apologized a few times, but…”

He gestures vaguely at the door as he turns and slowly shuffles away.

“Maybe she’ll talk to you.”

Daisy watches him go, sad for him, sadder for Jemma, before finally turning and tapping once on the door.

“Jemma?” She calls gently, still hardly believing that her friend is really there, behind that door once again. “I’m coming in, okay?”

The lights are off in the room, but Daisy can see from the light of the hall that the bed is empty. She holds her breath for a moment and hears the snuffling coming from the corner, so Daisy steps in and closes the door.

“Jemma,” she repeats, stepping slowly through the darkness in the direction of her friend. Eventually she finds the right shadow and sinks to her knees, touching Jemma’s shoulder gently before settling down beside her, cornered on two sides by brick walls and a third side by the desk.

“I can’t…” Jemma is whispering, barely able to speak between shuddering breaths. “I’m sorry…I can’t talk about it…”

“It’s okay,” Daisy whispers, slipping an arm around her shoulders and pulling Jemma as close as she will let her. “You don’t have to talk. And you don’t have to be okay.”

She’s been here before. She knows how to comfort without knowing all…or any…of the details. Just like May and all her nightmares, all her travels, holding her close without needing to know what traumas has pulled her away again.

You don’t have to know or understand everything to still offer what you can.

“I’m with you, Jemma, you’re doing great. Take all the time you need.”

September 29, 2015

May:
Hunter has managed to fight his way into Hydra, she’s keeping a room at a motel in the next city, and she’s getting way too bored waiting for him to make a move. They meet up at a parking garage in New Haven a few weeks after his initial break-in brawl to swap updates and new burner phones. He says he’s finally got a job coming with some of the Hydra higher-ups, but that seems to be all he knows about it—that it’s happening.

“So what’s the job?”

“Don’t know.”

“When’s it going down?”

“Don’t know”

“Any idea where?”

“Not yet.”

Annoyed, she crosses her arms. “You do understand that the point of intelligence gathering is to gather intelligence?”

But Hunter seems intent on playing nonchalant. “The point is, I’m moving up the food chain, and that lunatic Kebo is finally bringing me in on a job.”

*Kebo. The highest Hydra goon that Hunter’s met so far. Still…*

“Or luring you into a trap,” she reminds him. “We have to be smart about this.”

“It’s not complicated, really,” Hunter says with a shrug. “Just point, shoot, repeat as necessary.”

“You don’t have enough intel,” she says humorlessly. “It’s sloppy.”

But Hunter only shakes his head, finally facing her. “If it’s a chance to find Ward, it’s worth it.”

“Really? What if you walk into a room of Hydra enforcers with guns pointed at your head?”

He gives her a pointed look. “That’s what you’re here for—to help. Try to keep up, love.”

“This isn’t funny, Hunter. What if there are innocent lives at risk? I want Ward as bad as you do, but I don’t think his life is worth yours or Bobbi’s.”

“Well, on that we can agree,” he says, still unapologetic.

She picks up her phone off the hood of the truck, deciding there’s no point in beating a dead horse. “Once you get the time and place, call me.”

He only sounds slightly sarcastic as he says, “Yes ma’am.”

He moves off to his car and drives away quickly. She climbs back into her car and stewes behind the steering wheel for a moment before reaching for her phone.

*He’s a survivor, May tells herself. He doesn’t want to die any more than you want him to—but he’s walking right into a snake pit without a plan except to kill a single snake.*

She sighs, flipping open her phone.
Best case scenario, this is all unnecessary, and he’ll just be mad at you for tattling.

Worst case scenario, this will save his life.

No need to wait until things get worse.

Coulson answers his phone on the second ring.

“Buck’s Bar,” he says cheerfully in her ear, and she feels an involuntary smile flit over her features at the sound of his voice.

“Does your bar carry Haig? She returns in their unofficial countersign.

“Melinda?” He sounds startled, as if someone just pulled his chair out from under him. “What’s going on?”

Your best friend assumes the worst because you’re finally reaching out to him. Says a lot about you.

Melinda sighs, staring up at the car’s ceiling.

“You’ve got an agent gone rogue,” she finally says, closing her eyes, “and he’s getting too sloppy for me to ignore.”

She quickly fills him in on the situation, and he gets ahead of her before she’s finished.

“Hunter needs backup,” he says, sounding tired.

“More than I can provide.

“That’s saying a lot. Most of our resources are focused on a manhunt—or a monster hunt—but if this leads to Ward, then that would be huge. When’s Hunter going in?”

“I don’t know specifics, but he’s mostly been on the east coast. He’s in too deep, Phil, and it’s affected his judgment.”

He’s quiet on the other end of the line after that, and she narrows her eyes even though he can’t see her.

“What?” she challenges.

She can hear a smile in his voice. “You sound like yourself. Like you’re doing okay.”

“I’m fine,” she mutters. “This isn’t about me, anyway.”

“You’re too hard on yourself. You know that?”

This time, it’s her turn to say nothing, and he finally sighs into the phone.

“We’re here for you two, whatever you need,” Coulson says. “Pass on any intel as it comes, and we’ll be right behind you.”

“Glad to hear it,” May says right as she hears the door to Coulson’s office open in the background.

“We got the DNA results back,” she hears Bobbi announce in the distance of the receiver.

“The killer’s an Inhuman,” Skye’s voice drifts in.
May immediately snaps her phone shut and drops it into the cup-holder like it’s burned her hand.

One crisis at a time.

September 30, 2015

Daisy:

“No change all night,” the scientist says when Daisy checks in on the medical wing early that morning to hear the status of their newest patient. The doctor shows her the results on a tablet, scrolling back through the past few hours. “Her vitals have been stable for a while, but she’s still catatonic. Hasn’t reacted to anyone or anything since you brought her back, not even when we drew blood.”

“Okay,” Daisy says, handing the tablet back and turning to go. “I’ll take her breakfast anyway and hope for the best.”

Jemma is making a morning tea in the kitchen when she gets there, and Daisy smiles at the sight of it as she pulls down a small plate, filling it with muffins from the breadbox.

“Up late or up early?” Daisy asks, referring to Jemma’s internal clock that is still struggling to realign with Earth’s circadian rhythms while they’re stuck underground.

“Up too early,” Jemma answers, ducking her head shyly into her mug. “But not as early as yesterday.”

“That’s good,” Daisy says, bumping the scientist lightly with one elbow as she picks up the plate and a glass of orange juice.

Overall, Jemma seems to be doing slightly better this week. Her hair has remained in its ponytail and her outfits still fall firmly in the function-over-fashion category, but she is doing more than just sleeping constantly, is eating a little more, and even her complexion seems to have improved in the past few days. Daisy wants to spend as much time with her as she can, but she also doesn’t want to smother or overwhelm her. Besides, they’ve all got so many other things—people—to worry about.

“Alisha?” Daisy calls through the glass when she gets down to the correct room, trying to get the redhead’s attention. “I’m coming in.”

Alisha doesn’t say anything, doesn’t move from the ball that she’s been curled up in for hours, and Daisy sighs as she bumps the door control with her elbow, carrying the tray of toast and fruit carefully into the white-walled room.

Alisha Whitley—Daisy knows her full name now—looks significantly younger than Daisy remembers from Afterlife, especially now that her makeup is smeared off and her lanky limbs are locked in a fetal position. According to Coulson, she had screamed in agony when one of her copies had died, drilled through the ribcage by the Rasta-hulk (him, again…) in the home of some other Inhumans. After a super-awkward run-in with the ATCU when she’d taken off after Lash, Daisy had hustled back to the jet to take care of Alisha while Coulson stayed to run cleanup. The redhead had already sunk into an unresponsive state by then, and Daisy had helped medical check on her as soon as they got her back to the Playground.

“You said she was far away from the action?” a baffled doctor had said as he listened to her heart. “Why does her pulse sound like she’d coming down from an anxiety attack?”
“I told you, she was there—a copy of her just died,” Daisy snaps. “How do you think you’d react?”

She knows it’s not his fault that none of this makes sense. But this wasn’t what Alisha wanted either when she showed up at their base two days ago, holding up a handwritten sign outside one of their perimeter cameras—I NEED TO TALK TO SKYE.

“I’m here to turn myself in,” she said without prelude when Daisy came out to meet her, backup waiting in the car on the road behind them. “Take me in—put me wherever you’re keeping other Inhumans—just let me help you bring in the others first.”

“Pardon me if I don’t trust you,” Daisy had said, crossing her arms and staring the other woman down. “Last time I saw you, you tried to kill me.”

Yeah. That happened,” the older woman said almost dismissively. “And things have gotten worse since then because you pushed those damn crystals in the sea. I’m giving you a chance to make up for that—too many of my friends are now missing or dead, and I don’t want myself or anyone else to die. So tell me what I have to do to get you to trust me.

Daisy narrowed her eyes. “Tell me what you’ve done since you tried to kill me.”

“Well, like any shackled convict,” the woman said, rattling the silver cuff on her wrist, the same kind that Daisy had once worn in another lifetime, “I tried to keep a low profile. Went back to my other life in Ontario for a while. And then I heard about the terragin outbreak right before my friends started disappearing. The end.”

“How many friends from before do you have in the US?” Daisy asked, staring her down.

“There used to be plenty of us—but it seems like there are fewer every time I look,” Alisha said, trying to give the illusion of nonchalance but unable to disguise the fear in her eyes. “I want to help you get to them first. Before whatever’s hunting them comes looking for me.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t get to your friends in time,” Daisy apologizes for the dozenth time after she sets the tray of food on the table near the bed. She stands next to the unmoving woman for a moment, then turns and sits down on the floor with her back against Alisha’s bed. “You did the right thing and came to us, and then we didn’t come through for you. I’m so sorry.”

She stays there for a moment, letting herself wonder all over again at how unbelievable everything in her life has become since this time last year…

Back then, your biggest concern was an 084 that Hydra seemed intent on getting their hands on, Ward locked up in the basement, and whether May was going to like her birthday present.

If I had time-traveled and visited my younger self and told her everything that would happen in the year ahead, I wouldn’t even have believed myself.

“You won’t be able to stop him,” Alisha suddenly whispers behind her, and Daisy turns sharply over one shoulder to see the woman still immobile but with her eyes fixed on Daisy’s. “He’s here to kill the Inhumans. You won’t be able to stop him.”

“Who?” Daisy demands, rising up on her knees and leaning closer to Alisha on the mattress. “Who is that thing?”

“The one who comes to play judge,” the redhead answers. “Your mother said someone like that would come if the worse One was coming next.”
“The worse one?” Daisy repeats. “A worse monster?”

“Not a monster,” Alisha whispers, her voice getting softer. “A multitude.”

Try as she might, Daisy can’t get anything else out of Alisha after that. She eventually leaves her though and heads back upstairs to see if she can find another lead to follow.

Through the virus in the couple’s computer, Daisy tracks down its source—a trader in Baltimore. Coulson arranges a playdate for the ATCU to show up at the same time when they go to investigate him, and Daisy grits her teeth and says nothing to or about the dragon lady—Rosalind Price—as she and her men shadow them through the house.

She finds Frye curled up in a closet, and he all but howls at her when she tries to coax him out. The man seems to have reactionary powers, coming down with headaches every time he’s close to another Inhuman, so Daisy has to stand outside the room while Coulson and Price interrogate him. He insists that the monster, who he refers to as “Lash”, gave him the names of the Inhumans to find, and all he did was track them down.

“You should be helping Lash, not hunting him,” the man says, sounding like he believes what he’s saying. “Do you think he likes doing what he’s doing? He doesn’t. He’s no angel—he’s just a guy trying to do the right thing.”

The ATCU sedates him and takes him into custody, and Daisy demands that Coulson convince Rosalind to let her and Mack ride along. She and Mack climb into the back of the truck with Frye and two armed ATCU agents, and someone closes them in for the ride.

A very, very long ride.

“Feels like we’re driving in circles,” she grumbles eventually. Her growling stomach and full bladder are telling her they’ve been in this car way too long, and it feels like they’ve done way too many turns. Frye is getting progressively antsier, his skin slowly breaking out in new blisters, too.

“I feel like his meds are wearing off…” Daisy mutters to Mack, concerned.

And then suddenly, everything happens very fast.

There’s a thud on the roof at the same moment Frye yelps in pain, and abruptly a circle of blue light vaporizes the metal above them and a hulking figure drops in. The truck veers as both Mack and the two guards rush at him, but when they’re knocked aside almost lazily by the creature, Daisy raises her hands and blasts him with her powers. What she didn’t consider, however, was the effect the blast would have on the truck, which flips onto its side and sends her slamming into the wall. Her back takes the brunt of the impact, knocking the wind out of her, but her head breaks her impact when the truck skids for a few seconds along the asphalt.

By the time she is aware of anything again, she can smell gasoline leaking and hear Frye groaning as the monster hauls him through the hole in the roof out onto the street. Her ears are ringing, but she thinks she can hear the monster’s growl through the haze.

“I’m not merciful—I’m necessary.”

Blue-white light steals her vision for a moment as she raises her head in the voice’s direction, and when her eyes manage to focus and the light fades a little, she sees the monster rising from the place where the other Inhuman’s body now lies still on the asphalt. Her muscles tense as the creature seems to look in her direction, and she tries to rouse herself to have even the smallest chance of fighting back…but then Lash just turns away, moving out of sight. On the wall across from the truck, Daisy
sees his shadow march slowly down the street, then spasm for a moment…and shrink.

September 30—October 1, 2015

May:

The next day, she gets a message from Hunter that Kebo has told him to be ready for a job at 0100 that night, and he forwards her the address where they’re meeting. She watches from a distance as some Hydra goons crack the burner phone she gave Hunter in half, but Hunter’s already stuck the sensor on the car’s exterior—it will be simple enough to track, no matter where they go next.

Good thing, too, because they drive all night. She calls Coulson again with the information as Hunter’s car enters an armed checkpoint about an hour after sunrise, and she drives right past to maintain her cover.

“I think this is it. Get here as soon as you can,” she says quickly as she cases the perimeter. “He probably won’t have long between walking in and getting his cover blown. Ward knows his face.”

“May, you might want to know,” Coulson says, sounding like he’s hurrying somewhere, “there was another monster attack last night, we’re playing catchup right now…”

“Coulson,” she snaps, driving her car off the road and grabbing her gun out of the glove compartment. “I’ve gotta go. I’ll activate my earpiece.”

She’s almost spot-on with her prediction. By the time she’s taken out two exterior guards and made her way up to the rafters, the gunfire has already started. Ward is cornered in his office while the other Hydra soldiers attempt to surround Hunter, who’s hiding just out of the line of fire. She glimpses the look on Ward’s face as he leaps out of the shadows and takes out three of his men, then leaps down beside Hunter.

“Eleven, including Ward,” he mutters as she reloads her gun.

“I’ve taken out five,” she says, snapping the magazine up into the barrel.

“Slow day?” he deadpans.

They shoot their way closer to the office, but as soon as there’s a break in the gunfire, Ward’s taunting voice carries over to them.

“May? Is that you? Because that would be great.”

She touches her earpiece. “Coulson, what’s your ETA?”

“We’re still twenty minutes out from your position. You need to get out of there, now.”

She glances around at the mayhem. “I’m not sure we can do that.”

A moment later, a smartphone clatters to the ground between her and Hunter, thrown by Ward. Displayed on the screen is a video of Andrew investigating the shelves of a pharmacy, seeming oblivious to the camera.

“That’s a live feed, May. Dr. Garner’s on his way to teach a class right now!” Ward calls from his hiding place, just a few meters from them now. “Psych 301, I believe?”
“I’ve got my men on him right now. I guess it would have been more fitting for it to be Skye—she is your most recent squeeze after all—but Garner was just too easy to corner…”

“He’s bluffing!” Hunter hisses from across the aisle. “He’s trying to get in your head, the video’s fake!”

On the screen, Andrew seems to catch sight of the cameraman, saying something with an annoyed look on his face.

“If I don’t call off my men,” Ward continues taunting, “the ex-Mr. May is a dead man. All you have to do is put your weapons down, and I’ll let you go.

“You’re lying!” May shouts, barely able to pull her eyes from the screen.

All you’ve ever done…

“I’m not!” Ward all but croons back. “I give you my word, May.”

Hunter looks panicked, seeing her resolve cracking. “He has a warehouse full of guns here that I brought him. A lot of people will die, May!”

She stares at the screen, the silent moving picture of men who must be Ward’s closing in on Andrew…

He doesn’t deserve this. He may be helping SHIELD, but he didn’t sign up for this.

If he dies today, it will be because of me, too…

“It’s Andrew,” she says to Hunter, pleading with her gaze. “He doesn’t deserve this.”

For a suspended second, she thinks he might be about to lower his gun. But then Hunter’s gaze turns apologetic, and she knows what he’s about to do.

“I’m sorry,” he whispers before swinging out from behind his cover, gun blazing.

“No!” she shouts, throwing herself out after him.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, the Lincoln/Daisy storyline stays. There will be some obvious differences, but I’ve said before that major canon events will stay the same (because I’m lazy and because I find it easier to work around them rather than re-write them XD). In response to a couple of comments, I feel the need to say that May and Daisy are still absolutely endgame, but, like everything else in their lives, they don’t get an easy road to the end.

Also, did you know that the woman who plays Alisha has been like EVERY AWESOME WOMAN’S stunt double? Including Wonder Woman????? I mean, jeez, she didn't have to go that hard...seriously go check her IMDB page
Spiraling

Chapter Summary

Getting the band back together

Chapter Notes

Soooooo I didn't expect to take a two-month hiatus, but its a testament to how much has happened in the past two months that I really hadn't realized how much time had gone by until I checked on this fic last week. :/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

October 1-5, 2015—May is 46, Daisy is 27

Coulson had called up a quinjet of agents from the Playground to extract her and Hunter and clear out the Hydra base while his plane sped to Culver, trying to get to Andrew in time. May manages not to throttle Hunter while they wait, tuning out his useless apologies as she paces, demanding updates every other minute from Coulson.

“We’re looking for a safe place to land now,” he says. “My agent still isn’t responding. There seems to have been an explosion…”

For a few breathless minutes, May can only hear the ambient noise as Coulson gives orders and leads in his team, hears the sounds of a fire being put out and then—

“May, I’ve got eyes on Andrew!”

She goes rigid, closing her eyes and grabbing a fistful of her own hair.

“Is he—“

“He’s alive—looks like he might even be okay!”

May lets out a breath that brings a startling whimper with it, and when Hunter asks what Coulson just said, she just spins and punches him as hard as she can in the gut. He doesn’t fight back, just slinks away groaning, and that’s the only reason she doesn’t hit him twice.

Their extraction arrives a few minutes later, and when they make it back to the Playground, it barely registers how long it’s been since she’s seen the hangar and the brick hallways as she rushes through them for the first time in months. She finds Coulson with Andrew, who is braced on a stretcher in the med bay, a bloody bandage over his forehead and his clothes reeking of smoke.

His eyes are open, though, and he responds to her voice.

“Andrew,” she gasps, stopping breathlessly outside the circle of activity as doctors tend to him. “What happened?”
She and Phil stand at his side while Andrew explains about one of his students came in armed with two older men, gasoline, guns, and a lighter…

“If Phil hadn’t had his agent tailing me,” Andrew says, “I wouldn’t have made it out alive. I don’t think anyone could have survived that blast. I just don’t know why they were after me…”

“I do,” Melinda says, glancing over at Coulson.

“This isn’t your fault,” her friend says firmly in response. No judgment, no guilt trip, no lecture—just the admonition she’s never believed but he’s never stopped telling her.

It feels like I never left.

Out in the hall, Phil stops Hunter from going in to see Andrew and officially benches him from the mission to take out Ward.

“Good. Then put me on it,” May demands, rounding on Coulson, who gives her a challenging look.

“Are you back?” he asks, and she takes a deep breath.

The reasons for leaving haven’t changed.

The reasons for getting back in action have just gotten a lot bigger.

“I’ll take care of Ward for you,” she says. “And then we’ll see.”

It’s the best she can promise.

Coulson holds her gaze, and she thinks for a moment that he may be about to argue with her. But then he nods once, turning to go.

“We’ve got a new plane for things like this,” he says as he leaves. “It’s all yours, May.”

Bobbi is less than amused when she realizes that May was testing her by attacking her in the training room to gauge how well she’s healed since January, but she follows readily enough when May tells her to suit up and get to the plane. Once they’re airborne (in the plane of her dreams) and set on a course to the Cayman Islands, however, Bobbi rounds on May with the inevitable lecture.

“I hope you know that the only reason I didn’t drag you by the hair into to a sit-down with Daisy was because she was out on a mission.” Bobbi looks more disappointed than angry, which makes it easiest for May to just drop her gaze, shaking her head.

“Wouldn’t have been time for that conversation today.” she says, busying herself with the search program running on the screen in front of her.

“Probably not, but you won’t be able to avoid her forever,” Bobbi says. “Even if she is doing her best to not chase you down.”

May says nothing, afraid to crack that door, knowing that Bobbi could probably tell her everything about Skye and the way the past few months have been for her.

They land in the Caribbean and do a quick shopping trip for their disguises, and May doesn’t miss how gun-shy the seasoned agent is when things don’t go as planned in the bank, even against low-wage bank cops and an overweight bank manager. When they burst into the apartment in Lisbon, however, and find themselves face to face with five Hydra agents and the Strucker kid suspended by his wrists, bleeding from too many places, Bobbi flies back into action just like before. She
dispatches three agents outside while May neutralizes the other two and manages to get the boy down from his restraints.

“Strucker!” she shouts in his face as she presses down on his abdominal wound, realizing this may be it for him but hoping he has enough time to answer the only question that matters. “Where do I find Ward?”

The young man’s eyes are unfocused, unseeing. “I tried to do what Ward wanted…I tried to kill him…”

“How? Dr. Garner?” May repeats, blood seeping out from beneath her fingers.

“We had him,” the boy shudders, “but I didn’t know he was going to turn into that thing…”

*Thing?*

*What thing?*

*Turn into?*

“What happened?” she asks, still not sure what she’s hearing.

“Someone was there to protect him…” the boy shudders. “He shot Gregory, then Smitz shot him… but then Professor Garner…monster. Big. Scary. Didn’t look human. Killed Smitz with his hands. I ran. The place blew up.”

“No,” May whispers, disbelieving. “That’s not true.”

The dying boy’s eyes finally fix on hers. “What is he?” he gasps.

May presses harder on the wound, feeling their time running out. “I don’t know…”

**Daisy:**

She had been out when she got the call from Simmons about Dr. Garner getting attacked by some of Ward’s men, but by the time she made it back to base, Andrew was awake and responsive.

“Hey!” Daisy says breathlessly as she rushes into the medical wing. “Heard what happened. How do you feel?”

“Kind of shaken, but all right, Andrew says, shifting in his hospital bed.”

“You look pretty good for a guy who just survived an assassination attempt,” Daisy comments, taking in his minimal injuries.

“Tell that to your doctors—they’ve still got me on prescribed bedrest for twenty-four hours for observation. Seems like they’re watching for delayed shock.”

“Well, I’ve been stuck right where you are too,” Daisy says, remembering Doctor Simmons playing warden over her after her near-death experience, “and let me tell you, it is nearly impossible to convince doctors to let you off the bedrest sentence early.”

She sits down with him for a while to hear the story, but she can’t help interrupting with a question when Andrew explains why Ward sicced his men on him.
“I mean, I know he’s got plenty of reasons to hate May, but why would they attack you that exact moment?” she asks. “Middle of the day, plenty of witnesses around…”

In his hospital bed, Andrew shrugs. “I don’t know the details, but apparently May and Hunter had just cornered Ward in his base. Attacking me to scare May off was his ace in the hole.”

“Wait, wait wait…May was with Hunter?” Daisy repeats, the fact lodging at the front of her mind, impossible. “Since when?”

“Not sure,” Andrew answers as Daisy jumps to her feet.

“I saw Hunter just a second ago,” she says, backing away and doing her best to look apologetic. “I have to…”

“Go on, Daisy,” Andrew says with a tired wave of his hand. “I’m sure I’ll be right here whenever you get back.”

She tracks Hunter down in the labs, pestering Fitz at his workstation, and all but drags him by the collar out into the hall.

“What the hell, Hunter?” she demands, shoving him against the bricks. “You go off on your revenge mission and decide it’s okay to call in May to help you with your vendetta?”

“Enough with the rough hands!” he snaps, batting her arms away. “Between you and her and Hydra, I’ve had about enough for one day.”

“Tell me what happened, Hunter,” she demands, still crowding in threateningly and boring into his eyes with her own. “Or I swear to god, I’ll show you that I don’t need my hands to hurt you.”

Hunter sighs, looking away. “I picked her up in Arizona, she went undercover with me, had my back while I tunneled into Hydra from below, then covered me as I went in today.”

“And where is she now?” Daisy narrows her eyes.

“Gone again,” he says with a helpless wave of his hand. “Came back with me to make sure Andrew was all right, then she nabbed Bobbi and they left with the Zephyr. Coulson gave her the go-ahead to finish the job.”

Betrayal stabs Daisy right between the ribs.

“May was here?” she repeats dumbly.

Hunter meets her eyes and sighs. “Ships in the night,” he says, shrugging. “But if nothing else, she’ll have to bring Bobbi and that plane back eventually.”

Daisy walks away with as much of her pride intact as she can manage, making her way to her room and throwing open the door expectantly. All is as she left it before she’d gone out earlier that morning, but she can smell the faintest trace of something familiar. May had never worn perfume, but between her shampoo, soap, and deodorant, she has a recognizable enough scent, and Daisy can tell she was here not long ago.

Moving to the dresser, she yanks open a drawer. Two of her t-shirts are missing. As are few pairs of underwear. And May’s black vest and a pair of her boots that she’d left behind back in the winter have disappeared from the closet.
But no note, no message, no significant items laid out where she’s sure to notice them…

_Ships in the night._

Frustrated, Daisy slams the drawer shut again and bangs her fist once on the surface of the dresser, feeling more insulted than anything else.

--

That night, the spare phone that she barely uses starts vibrating in her pocket, and Daisy ducks around to an abandoned corner of the halls to answer the blocked number.

“Rockin’ Roller Rink,” she mutters, daring to hope…

“This is General Electric,” Lincoln’s voice filters through on the other end.

Both disappointed and relieved, Daisy huffs out a laugh into the phone.

“Hey,” she says, not having to fake sounding glad to hear from him. “Are you safe?”

“Safe as houses,” he says. It sounds like he’s walking.

She cuts right to the chase.

“How long are you going to run?”

“Haven’t decided yet. You’re pretty much the only person I can call these days.”

“Don’t you have family?”

“No,” Lincoln says, obviously trying to sound okay with this fact. “My mom died in a car accident a couple of years ago. And I never knew my dad.”

“No extended family?” Daisy says, her heart hurting for him, sad to realize that they have this in common too.

“No one I kept up with. And now, not knowing their stance on having a fugitive for a cousin…”

“Got it. Any friends?”

“Less than I used to,” he sighs. “I keep turning up at empty homes.”

“Yeah, well I don’t have that many friends either, so I’d really like it if you didn’t get yourself killed.”

He laughs tiredly into the phone, and she lets herself smile.

“How long until this call is traceable?” he says then.

Daisy pulls the device from her ear and checks the screen. “Fifteen seconds.”

He doesn’t say anything, and she can feel the question stretching between them, vibrating like a plucked string.

_What are we doing?_

“I’ll reach out soon,” he finally says.
“Hope so,” she whispers, meaning it.

She ends the call and slips her phone into her pocket as she ducks back around the corner.

--

The call comes in late the next night that May and Bobbi have the Strucker kid in custody and are bringing him back to base. Coulson’s about to meet with POTUS and the ATCU lady, and since Andrew was discharged from the sick ward that afternoon, Coulson sends him to check up on Joey, hoping to have a positive case to present as an example of how Inhumans can be coached and assisted through their transitions. Daisy is still stewing over what she, Mack, and Hunter saw when they flew the upgraded Dwarf drone into the ATCU’s facility yesterday—Inhumans boxed up in jello, waiting for a cure—so she nearly rolls her eyes when Coulson says he wants her to talk to Price—the ATCU lady—before the POTUS meeting.

“Winning her over to your side could be a real step towards legitimizing SHIELD,” Coulson reminds her, not ignoring her reaction. “Make her see things from your side.”

“I’m not convinced that the ATCU are the people we’re supposed to be trusting,” she challenges, not willing to agree without a little bit of a fight.

“We’ve been through this already, Daisy,” he reminds her, sounding just a little impatient. “I don’t trust them yet, but there’s only one way to get there. They showed me their place, now we show them ours.”

“And your talking monkey for wow factor?”

“For god’s sake, Daisy,” Coulson says, dropping a file onto his desk with a little more force than necessary and looking up at her sharply. “What do you want me to say? You know perfectly well that’s not how I think of you.”

“You don’t, but she will,” Daisy says, crossing her arms.

“Do you have a better idea of how to convince a person like her that people like you aren’t to be feared?” Coulson looks like he’s genuinely asking, and Daisy hates that she doesn’t have a response for him, so she decides to cut her losses and walk away. She knows she’s acting like a teenager when she slams his door as she walks out, but she doesn’t care—he’s the only one near enough to be mad at.

But almost as soon as she gets downstairs, she rounds the corner and sees a familiar shape.

They both freeze at the sight of each other, and Daisy feels her face go slack with shock.

“May!” she gasps, staring at her. She sees the other woman’s limbs go rigid, overriding a fight-or-flight response as Daisy takes a few disbelieving steps towards her…

_Understandable, considering our last two interactions._

The panic in May’s eyes lessens only slightly when Daisy halts her approach. A dozen sentences pile up on her tongue, all the things she’s imagined herself saying when they finally saw each other again—apologies and explanations and angry reactions…

But none of them make it out now as Daisy exhales, staring at a person she knows so well but currently feels like she doesn’t know at all. May still looks like she wants to run, but she’s the first one to draw breath and finally get a sentence out.
“Where’s Andrew?”

Surprised and more than a little stung, Daisy narrows her gaze slightly before answering. “He’s doing an assessment on one of the new Inhumans at an off-site facility.”

Are you seriously going to do this? Ignore everything else that’s happened and mention your ex first?

“Where?” May demands quickly, shifting forward slightly.

“Staten Island,” Daisy answers automatically, confusion displacing her frustration slightly. “When did you get back? Where’s the Strucker kid?”

But May is already turning away. “I have to go,” she mutters as she moves down the hallway, hurrying back towards the hangar.

“May!” Daisy calls once as she watches her leave, but she forces herself not to follow when she sees the way May doesn’t slow down. Confused and more than a little hurt, Daisy sighs, but it’s only when she resumes her path towards the barracks that she notices Hunter watching her from a bend in the corridor.

“Well,” he says, sounding as smug as ever, “you sure held your ground.”

“Fuck off, Hunter,” Daisy snaps, sending a pulse through the floor at his feet with a flick of one hand. He yelps as he leaps from the spot, and Daisy purses her lips as she keeps walking away, unable to ignore the disappointment slowly swallowing everything else in her chest.

She doesn’t care about you as much as you care about her.

You know that.

You’ve known that since you were twelve.

And it’s never made a single bit of difference.

She’s on the Zephyr that afternoon with Coulson and the ATCU lady in the middle of one of the most uncomfortable encounters she’s had with an adult in years when Mack radios in from another quinjet and requests to dock. Lincoln is with him as they board the Zephyr, and Daisy all but jumps him as they catch sight of each other.

“He came to me,” Mack says as he begins the explanation to Coulson and the other. “He’s got intel on Lash.”

“Those of us from Afterlife were trained to blend in,” Lincoln says from under a mop of unwashed hair, “yet that thing keeps finding us. He’s killed most of my friends. And that makes me think that Lash is using Jiaying’s ledger to find us.

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boxes of books she herself had packed up from Jiaying’s home months ago.

Until I recovered it.

“So I think Lash is in SHIELD,” Lincoln concludes, his gaze still on Daisy. “You’ve had the book since before Lash appeared. It’s the only possibility.”

“No it’s not,” Coulson says over Lincoln’s shoulder, his face pale. “I sent Jiaying’s books out of house a few months ago.”

Lincoln rounds on him, looking terrified. “To who?”

May:

When she comes to, she’s in an office-like room that’s obviously in the middle of renovation, and she’s on the ground, shackled by one wrist to a gas tank. Andrew appears from another room as soon as she starts struggling, yanking against the restraints, but he stays a good distance away from her when she swings at him as soon as he gets to close.

“You shot me!” she snarls, still disbelieving. Her head swims slightly as she staggers to her feet, the now-familiar ICER dendrotoxins obviously still dissipating.

“We couldn’t stay there. Not with SHIELD. I needed time to explain.”

“What have you done? Let me go!” she shouts, yanking at the length of her restraint and assessing everything she can reach within its radius—nothing except Andrew, who is just looking at her sadly.

“I know what this looks like—” he begins, his hands still raised slightly, as if to seem unthreatening.

“What it looks like?” she cries, staring disbelievingly at him. “You *killed* all those people…How? When did this…”

“After I saw you in Hawaii,” he says, closing his eyes and turning away slightly before continuing. “Daisy’s mom kept records, and I was going through them for any insight before I started consulting on any more Inhumans. I found a book that had all these names, but Jiaying must have rigged it with a terragin crystal to keep out anyone who couldn’t survive the mist.”

May is still trying to fit her head around what he’s describing.

Skye’s mother.

Records.

Terragin.

Inhuman.

“At first, I was relieved,” Andrew is saying, still looking away from her. “I mean—I survived! But I knew something had happened. I felt nauseous, like my heart was in my head…it was as if I was compelled, I had to be near them.”


Andrew finally looks at her
“I didn’t know why…it was a hunger on my skin. It wasn’t until I finally met one that my body took over and I…lashed out. Then I felt relief.”

“Why didn’t you just go to Coulson? Turn yourself in?” she whispers, still barely believing what she’s hearing. “They would have helped—”

“They would have locked me away!” he snaps. “Just like they do with all their recruits—hiding them from the world that isn’t ready for them.

“And if I hadn’t shown up at the Cocoon today, were you going to hurt Joey?” she asks, feeling like her stomach has sunk into her feet.

“Of course not,” Andrew says sternly. “And you know I’d never lay a finger on Daisy—I know how much she means to you.”

“But you went after Lincoln?” May says instead of correcting him, and Andrew’s expression immediately darkens.

“That kid has a dark side. I don’t know how I know it, but every time I’m near an Inhuman, I know whether they should live or die. I don’t want to be a murderer, but…I have to do what’s necessary.”

May turns away, thoughts racing, unsure what to say.

“I didn’t really have a plan beyond bringing you to a private place so that I could explain…so that you could understand…” Drew says beside her, sounding like he’s wringing his hands. “But Melinda…I know you’ve been here. You know about doing what’s necessary…”

Melinda closes her eyes. “How dare you…” she breathes. “How dare you try to compare what you’ve done to what I did…”

“Because you understand how terrible it is to live with,” he says quietly behind her. “And the difference it makes when someone doesn’t give up on you.”

She takes a deep breath and turns to face him, meeting his gaze.

“Do you want help? Or do you want to keep doing what you think you have to do?”

He rubs his hands tensely over one another.

“I want to be myself again,” he says slowly. “I don’t want to be this monster…”

“Then call Coulson,” she says firmly, “and let’s start trying to figure this out.”

“No need actually,” a voice comes from the door, and they both spin in its direction. Coulson steps out of the shadows, hands empty. “Sorry to interrupt—still waiting on Joey’s reassessment.”

“Phil,” Andrew says, taking a step towards him, and May grabs for his arm, “you don’t understand.”

“I’m starting to,” Coulson says, his gaze sliding to May. “You all right?”

She nods, and he faces Andrew again.

“We’re old friends, so I’d prefer to see everyone walk out of this unharmed. But in case you’ve got something else in mind, I’m not alone.”

And now May hears the sounds outside the room of many feet moving, wonders how many people
that she knows are out there…

“This doesn’t have to go down badly,” Coulson says slowly, stepping fearlessly closer to Andrew. “I’ll make sure you’re taken care of.”

“I understand the position you’re in, I do,” Andrew says, now close enough to grab Phil if he wanted to. “But I’m trying to help you—we’ve got an outbreak on our hands! I’m simply trying to sort the good from the bad—you gave me this job.”

“That’s a pretty poor interpretation of a therapist!” Coulson says, sounding disgusted. “Look around you—we’re in some abandoned building, May’s tied up—you’re not okay!”

“I know how it looks,” Andrew says again his voice growing thicker, “but I have a moral responsibility—you’ll see soon! I’m doing you a favor. I’ve only killed those who deserve it.”

The lights around them suddenly explode in showers of white sparks. From the hallway, another figure emerges, a young voice carrying through the darkness.

“Who the hell made you judge, jury, and executioner?”

Lincoln.

Coulson rounds on the young man, glaring. “What are you doing?” he snaps, stepping between Lincoln and Andrew, whose face immediately changes.

“You’ve gotta get him out of here now!” May yells towards Coulson, realizing suddenly what is about to happen.

“You tore my friends apart,” Lincoln snarls, advancing on them. His eyes seem lit up from within with crackling energy. “You have no right…”

“That’s enough!” Coulson attempts, striding towards Lincoln.

“Calm down, Andrew. Please,” May gasps, barely reaching for him as she sees something foreign rippling under his skin.

“I have every right,” he says, squaring up towards Lincoln.

“Andrew, listen to me,” Coulson says, remaining between him and Lincoln even as they draw closer to one another, “we can help—the ATCU is close to a cure!”

The sounds of clothing tearing and a body transforming are almost too much for May to bear. She can’t even breathe as she looks up at the creature that emerges in front of her.

“I am the cure!” it roars.

Bolts of blue electricity fly from Lincoln’s hands, knocking the monster-that-used-to-be-Andrew back, and Coulson rushes to May’s side, talking to someone on comms, explaining situation and position.

“Phil!” she gasps, gripping the sleeve of his jacket. She feels the warning tug in her stomach, a ripcord trying to pull itself, and fights back with everything in her.

“Our goal is to capture, not kill,” Coulson reassures her, thrusting a ring of keys into her hands. “We’ve just gotta get Lincoln on the same page. Here, try those.”
There is shouting and gunfire echoing in the space outside the office as she frantically tries key after key until the cuffs open, and she races out into the chaos, realizing as soon as she sees the rest of the building that this is the day, this is the place, this is the monster that she saw in her forward-travel months and months ago…

She’s running up a staircase when she hears the scream of the woman falling to her death, knows that somewhere in the room she just left, her past self is watching with horror…

She comes out on one landing and finds the bodies of four soldiers, necks twisted and spines crumpled. Nausea twists her insides, not because of the carnage, but because she realizes what she has to do.

Kneeling briefly, she picks up a pistol.

Lincoln goes flying across the floor in front of her as she finally runs out on the right level, and she shoves her gun into her waistband.

“Andrew!” she shouts, throwing herself between the boy and the monster. “Stop!”

He stares her down unsympathetically. “Move,” he orders in a voice that sounds nothing like the man she once married.

But she stands her ground because she knows she can.

“Go on,” she says, shaking her head, raising her empty hands helplessly. “Might as well. I’ve thought about my death enough times, the different ways I could go—I just never thought it would be you.”

*It won’t be. You’ll find a way…*

The monster suddenly shudders, hunching over as the deformities withdraw into its body.

“You *have* to stop this, Andrew,” she says, taking another step closer as Andrew’s shape reemerges from the monster’s.

“Melinda,” he finally breathes in his own voice, straightening up and gazing longingly at her.

May tries to offer the only smile she can manage. And then she draws her gun.

Three bullets send him flying back into the containment module. She slams her hand on the control panel to close the door, shuddering as Lash rises up from the floor, roaring at her through the glass. Then white clouds of gas obscure him, and Andrew’s hand slides slowly down the glass as the incapacitating chemicals do their work.

She feels Coulson rush to her side, sounding breathless and horrified as he asks,

“How did you know that wouldn’t kill him?”

She pulls in her own breath, her first one in nearly a minute.

“I didn’t.”

She turns away because she can hear others coming and hears Skye’s voice among them, ducking into the shadows and trying to get herself under control. She can still feel the tug of time-travel, and she continues to push back.
Not now...

She follows them out as they load the pod onto the plane, is introduced to a woman named Rosalind (it takes her a minute to realize that this is the woman Lash dropped off a ledge—she probably has Skye to thank for her life...), and hovers near the pod as they quickly get airborne.

The person inside is Andrew again, sprawled on the floor.

Rosalind is talking, trying to explain to her about the option of putting Andrew in “stasis”—a suspended state where the Inhuman is neither awake nor asleep but definitely alive—and how it could slow his transformation into Lash and buy them some time until the ATCU found a cure. May is barely hearing her.

“I can’t pretend to understand what you’re going through,” the woman is saying at her elbow, sounding sincere, “but, for what it’s worth, if I had the chance to save someone I love, I’d take it.”

May believes her earnestness, sees her reasoning, but before answering, she looks over her shoulder at the other two people who haven’t been far away since she boarded the plane.

“What would you do?” she asks in their direction, but Coulson turns his gaze on Skye too, as if knowing this is who she meant to ask.

Skye looks a little surprised to be addressed, but it doesn’t hide the heartbreak in her eyes.

“Well, it’s a temporary solution,” she says slowly, pain in her voice. “I think we can all acknowledge that. But Andrew helped me, too, so I’d do whatever it takes.”

May glances once at Coulson, who gives a small nod, but she can’t look anyone in the eye as she says, “Do it.”

She walks away, feeling the tug of time again, and locks herself in the bathroom to breathe until she feels certain that she won’t disappear. They’ll still be airborne for another hour, but she thinks she might be able to make it that long.

There are plenty of people on the plane, and she avoids all of their eyes as she makes her way to a less-trafficked cargo area, finding an unused jumpseat beside a window and buckling into it. She rests her head against the glass, feigning sleep and breathing through the miles until a glow behind her eyelids makes her open them. Dawn is breaking through the clouds, and the plane seems to be descending.

May stares at the golden picture and remembers sitting with Andrew on the beach, the pain she had still been trying to process then, the pain she had no idea was yet to come. Clenching one fist, she presses the heel of her hand against her eyes and manages to hate herself more.

He didn’t deserve this.

He came back to SHIELD again because you asked him to.

You are, again, the beginning and the end of this.

The plane dips through the cloudcover, and May feels someone’s presence just over her shoulder, but she ignores it intentionally, unable to think about speaking to Skye right now. She watches as their hangar roof opens and their cloaked plane settles into the cavern beneath it, but she unbuckles as soon as she hears the sound of the ramp opening. She glimpses Skye in her periphery as she strides out and down into the hangar, making her way thoughtlessly into the base.
She’s halfway to the barracks halls when she suddenly remembers that she doesn’t have a bunk there apart from the space she once shared with Skye, so she just keeps walking, through the maze of tunnels to the escape area and up the stairs into the sun.

On the roof, everything is quiet, an indifferent blue-sky morning. May takes a few deep breaths of the fresh air, then backs into the shade and sinks down against the wall.

She exhales slowly and finally lets herself go.

Chapter End Notes

K, so obviously the encounter between May and Daisy would play out a little differently with this much between them. It hurt to do it...but next chapter's going to hurt more. :(

I was pretty sure this chapter would cover a little more time/events (there was a time I was going to try to finish out 3a in this chapter), but it was creeping up in 10,000 words already and felt way too crowded, so I split it. Get ready for the next chapter though--there may have been a reason I was stalling.
Crossroads

Chapter Summary

Going to the future and coming back

Chapter Notes

There are some heavy things in this chapter, so I'm posting warnings in the end notes. If you think you probably ought to check them, skip down and take a look. If you'd rather proceed without spoilers, go ahead.

And to all of you...brace yourselves. I told you there was a reason I was stalling.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

October 5, 2015—Daisy is 27, May is 46

May doesn’t resurface for most of that day, and Daisy holds herself back from scanning their security feeds to track down where she is, or ascertain whether she’s left again. She gets Lincoln set up with an empty bunk on the men’s hall, shows him around the necessary places, then tells him to catch up on sleep. She doesn’t see him for the rest of the day, and Daisy guesses that means sleep was exactly what he needed—he’s been on the run for weeks by now.

She tries to treat the day like any other—she goes to find Bobbi and fills her in, then Jemma, who looks stricken at the news about Dr. Garner. She does her training. She eats and showers, then follows up with the coverage of the incident at Culver the day before, deleting any sensitive information off the internet.

That evening, however, she’s more than a little startled when she opens her bedroom door to a knock...and it’s May standing on the other side.

The empty look in her eyes is heartbreaking.

“I was wondering if I could get some of my clothes,” she says in a voice so hollow that it’s echoing.

All the things Daisy wanted to say the day before pile up on her tongue again, but at the same time all she wants to do is pull May into her arms and press in her message without words. Her hand drifts upwards, halfway committing to the gesture, but when May visibly flinches back, Daisy deliberately lowers her hand again, her heart crumbling further as she just silently steps aside for May to come in.

She stands out of the way while the woman moves to their dresser, opening drawers and gathering a small pile of garments that Daisy thinks were probably all actually May’s, once upon a time. She pulls a pair of shoes from the closet and turns toward the door again, not meeting Daisy’s eyes, and on a sudden impulse, Daisy steps between her and the exit.

“Can we talk?” she blurts out as May flinches again, her eyes meeting Daisy’s for the first time since
she walked in.

For a long moment, May says nothing, but eventually, she sighs softly and drops her gaze again.

“Not right now. I just can’t.”

And Daisy knows that for May to admit she just can’t handle something is admitting just how broken she feels right now, after everything that’s happened in the past few days...

To a person she loved.

Because of what I did.

Daisy can’t get the words out, but she thinks them in her direction.

I’m sorry.

This shouldn’t have happened.

This is all my fault.

If May hears her, it doesn’t seem to matter—she leaves anyway. Daisy stands in the doorway watches her go, notes which bunk down the hall that May ducks into, the new place that she’s planning to stay…

And that’s it. Daisy doesn’t see her again for the rest of the night.

The next morning, Lincoln is in the kitchen when she goes in for breakfast, showered and shaved and looking the best she’s seen since Lash appeared in their lives. They walk around the Base together for awhile, catching up and ignoring the elephant following them down the halls until Lincoln finally brings it up.

“So…are we okay?” he eventually asks in a tentative tone, and she turns to face him.

“What do you mean?” she says, playing dumb because she’s obviously a coward.

He looks sheepish but not ashamed. “I mean, this may be the quickest I’ve ever moved in a relationship—one kiss, and then I move in with you…”

Internally, Daisy smirks.

Well, at least we did things in the right order, better than my last relationship…

Externally, she smiles, unsure what else to do.

“Why don’t we just see what happens?” she offers.

Because I have no idea how any of this is about to shake out.

“Will that happen again?” he asks, not looking terribly ashamed, and though Daisy feels a small curl of affection at the sight of the weight of the past few months gradually tumbling off his shoulders, she knows better than to promise anything.

“Planning takes the fun out of it,” she reminds him, steering them back to safer territory. “Plus, you know you’ll have tougher decisions to face, right? Coulson only lets people in the base who have a role in his game plan.”
“Game plan?” Lincoln repeats, and Daisy smiles smugly.

“Let me tell you about this Secret Warriors thing we’ve been working on.”

October 11, 2015

May:

The days pass like she’s watching them on a TV screen. Distant, intangible, impersonal.

For now, it’s the only way she can manage if she wants to stay in the present.

Not that she has been—every time she’s put her head on a pillow, she’s woken up somewhere else. Right after she’d gotten back to the Playground, she had disappeared into the past to the house she once shared with Andrew. The next time she traveled, it was to one of her childhood homes. The next time, her room at the Academy. The next time, it was to a tiny version of Skye.

Time has slowly loosened its grip on her since the day she came back, and it has been helpful—if not comforting—to have things to do for SHIELD again. She doesn’t doubt that Coulson would have given her time off again if she’d asked for it, but she needs her own closure too—Ward, Andrew, Hydra, Skye…all of it.

She had watched them put Andrew away in the ATCU a couple of days ago, still sealed safely in the pod she’d thrown him into with her own bullets. The woman from the night before was there, along with Coulson and Mack. May watches the exchange between her and Coulson from a distance, sees that intentional closeness masquerading as distance between them, but it’s a conversation she doesn’t feel ready for just yet.

Lincoln, however, is another story—because she’s seen the same careful distance between him and Daisy and suspects there is something else to know. She and Daisy still haven’t spoken, and May is certain that confronting a relative stranger will be far easier.

She doesn’t really take pleasure in the look on his face when she requests him to be in the plane with her when they go to extract Bobbi and Hunter from their infiltration of the ATCU, but there’s something validating about his horror nevertheless.

Skye runs the op from the Zephyr while Coulson distracts the ATCU lady—Rosalind, she hears Coulson correct in her mind. She has a name, Melinda, she’s not some stray…at the Playground. May watches Daisy lead and refuses to let herself feel proud—whatever role she might have played in Skye’s training, she knows Skye’s in the driver’s seat now because it was vacant.

She stepped up because you left.

When it’s time for their quinjet to break off and get into position, May glimpses Skye giving Lincoln an encouraging squeeze on his arm before he follows May out.

Interesting.

The silence of the plane ride feels tense, and May is running through ways she could say the words he deserves to hear.

“Are you torturing me?” the boy eventually asks. “Dragging me around, waiting for the other shoe to drop? Because if you blame me for bringing out the monster in that man, I’m not apologizing for
May bites her lip and takes a deep breath.

“I’ve been trying to figure out what to say,” she finally says slowly, truthfully. “Because I do want to apologize to you for Andrew. He killed your friends in cold blood. Tried to kill you. And I’m sorry. I should have known.”

Lincoln’s silence sounds puzzled, and it’s obvious that she’s surprised him. “I should be thanking you,” he eventually says. “For being willing to put those bullets in him when you did.”

Skye’s voice in her headset interrupts the moment suddenly.

“May—Bobbi and Hunter may need extraction sooner than you thought.”

Needless to say, May doesn’t ask him any more questions.

Once they’re all back in one place again, their team and Rosalind put the pieces together. Within the ATCU’s walls, a project has been going on to stockpile Inhumans—gathering them for some unknown purpose. Gideon Malick, Rosalind Price’s second-in-command, is head joining all these tales. The Monolith, monster on Jemma’s planet, the Inhumans, they all come together within Hydra—with him.

Lincoln is angry, Skye and Mack are confused, Jemma, Price, and Coulson look distraught, apparently miles ahead of the rest of them at figuring this out.

“Every Inhuman we’ve brought into the ATCU over the past few months was overseen by Malick,” Rosalind explains, looking sick to her stomach. “I’ve already called everyone I can think of. They either don’t know where the Inhumans are, or they’re not responding.”

“The secret society that was sending people to that planet for years…” Fitz says, “it was always Hydra. Just a different name.”

“To what end?” Skye asks, her gaze darting between Jemma, Coulson, and Lincoln.

“They were serving it,” Lincoln explains, dragging a tense hand through his hair. “Or trying to, anyway. This is why your mom was so afraid of that rock—because it was the only way that creature on the other side could come back to our world. And if it did, it would mean the end of us Inhumans.”

“So Malick stole all these Inhumans to sacrifice them to this thing?” Mack asks.

“Sure looks that way, doesn’t it?” Lincoln says, his voice strained, taking a few slow steps away from them. Like a magnet, Skye moves towards him, and May turns her gaze back on Coulson.

“So what now?”

There is so much to do, but only so many hours in a day. May eventually makes her way back to her bunk late that evening feeling cold, sick, and scared. They have no idea where Andrew or any of the other Inhumans are, but their scanners are hard at work searching, and for now, there is nothing she can do but wait. She can feel the coldness of the sheets through her clothes as she climbs into bed, staring into the darkness until her eyes drift shut.

Inevitably, she opens them to see something else.
It takes her a moment to recognize the space around her when she opens her eyes from the vantage point of a tiled floor, but as soon as she sees the legs of the weather-beaten dining room table and inhales the scent of a familiar house, she knows exactly where she is.

_Mom’s._

It seems to be mid-day, but the house is quiet. She’s not sure what day it is yet, or where her mother might be, but Melinda heaves herself to her feet and goes quickly to the guest bedroom, the room that was hers in her teenage years, and finds the set of clothes that her mother has always kept stowed in the bottom drawer of the dresser. It’s a basic outfit of jeans (thank goodness she still wears the same size that she did in the eighties) and a long-sleeved black shirt, an outfit that hopefully is timeless enough to not seem out of place no matter what decade she’s found herself in. After she pulls on the clothes and a pair of the house shoes that her mother keeps in the closet, she pads back down the short hall to the split-level living area.

On further inspection, she sees that her mother has finally invested in a new sofa, and the TV on the stand looks a lot more modern than the one that had been sitting there the last time she saw her mom’s home. The books and frames on the built-in shelves are immaculately dust-free as always, but, confusingly, there is also a bucket of children’s toy blocks tucked behind a magazine rack next to the armchair, a box of crayons sitting on the plastic-covered coffee table, and a few children’s books on the lowest shelf of the bookcase.

_Weird…_ Melinda thinks. _Maybe she’s had the neighbor’s kids over…_

She moves to the kitchen in search of the day’s newspaper, finding the appliances arranged on the plastic countertops exactly as they’ve always been. She fishes the kettle off the stove and refills it, then thinks better of turning on the gas for fear of disappearing and chooses to leave the full kettle in the sink. The newspaper is already folded up and tucked into the recycling bin by the door, but Melinda fishes it out and unfolds it to check the date.

_June 11, 2020_

_First time I’ve gone that far into the future in a while…_

She’s scanning the headlines of the paper—_wait, who is president?_—when she hears the automatic garage door opening outside and smiles at the sound of a vehicle rolling in—it sounds like her mother is still driving the Ford. Strangely, though, she hears two car doors closing and her mother talking to someone in muffled Chinese in the garage.

_Who is she bringing home?_

The garage is with the laundry room a half-level below the rest of the house, so it takes a couple of minutes for the party to make it up to the kitchen door. Finally, though, Melinda hears the keys rattling on the other side, but as the door swings open, it’s not her mother who walks through the door first.

It’s a child.

The girl looks maybe three or four years old, and she’s dressed in a bright purple shirt and lime-green bike shorts. The hair hanging in her face is golden brown, trimmed to a length just above her shoulders with bangs that stack up in a shelf above her eyes. The child doesn’t notice her, just steps onto the doormat and bends down to pull off her (pink) sneaker-sandals without being prompted.

Melinda’s mother enters right behind her, a few fabric grocery bags hanging from one hand.
“Xiān bǎ nǐ de xiézi tuō hǎole,” her mother says, pulling the door shut behind them and squeezing around the girl to step out of her own shoes. “ránhòu dài zhège dàizi qū fàng zài wèishēngjiān lǐmiàn, hǎo ma?”

“Howde,” the girl answers, pawing her hair out of her face with a chubby hand before picking up one of the bags and moving off in the direction of the bathroom. Melinda watches her go while her mother sets the other bags on the floor and puts her purse on the counter, seemingly still unaware of her presence.

Realizing she ought to speak first, Melinda raises a hand and knocks gently on the wall beside her.

“Mom.”

Her mother doesn’t yelp, but she does jump, one hand immediately snatching up her purse where Melinda knows the woman has always kept a gun…their eyes meet, and it seems her mother isn’t quite breathing for a moment.

“Melinda!” she gasps, unmoving beside the counter.

“Sorry to startle you,” Melinda apologizes quickly, reaching automatically for the quickest peace offering and fishing the kettle out of the sink to set it back on the stove. Her mother is frozen, still staring at her as Melinda turns the burner on, her face gone pale. Melinda catches her eye and attempts a smile as she moves to the cupboard to pull down two mugs for tea.

“Take a breath, Mom, you look like you’ve seen a…”

Wait.

Melinda turns to look at her mom again, but the small woman has already moved across the tile floor and is pulling her into a tight, desperate embrace.

Her mother does not hug.

And right now, she’s almost trembling.

Oh.

Melinda suddenly can’t breathe.

Oh God…

“I didn’t think…” her mother is saying slowly against her shoulder, her voice sounding tight and choked… “I didn’t know when…”

“When did I die, Mom?”

The question comes out on quivering syllables, stunned and shaky. She’s still barely breathing, unable even to raise her arms and return the embrace, a gesture that there could only be one reason for.

Her mother has tears in her eyes as she suddenly draws back, but they cling stubbornly to her lashes, as determined as everything else about her mother has ever been.

“You didn’t know,” she says slowly, her features barely betraying the horror that she must be feeling right now on top of the pain and relief. “You didn’t know until just this moment…”
When?” Melinda repeats, finally forcing herself to move, and raising her hands to her mother’s shoulders. She’s been taller than her since she was thirteen, but not by much, so they’re still nearly eye-to-eye.

Her mother looks stricken, unable to speak.

“I told you before it happened, didn’t I?” Melinda realizes, getting ahead of the situation. “I told you it was coming—I bet I prepared you for it. Didn’t I?”

Her mother says nothing, still staring at her, glassy-eyed.

“If I knew it was coming, then it’s because someone told me in my past, so you need to tell me now,” Melinda demands, gripping her mother’s small frame, begging with her eyes.

Her mother holds her gaze for a moment in silence, and Melinda can see the war going on within her.

She doesn’t want to be the one to tell me, but she knows I deserve to know.

“Mom,” she croaks out. “Please.”

Her mom purses her lips before dropping her eyes, pulling Melinda’s hands off her shoulders and clasping them tightly in her own.

“2016,” she answers heavily. And then she tells her the date.

It’s before Melinda’s next birthday.

Oh God…

“I don’t know how it happened,” her mother murmurs, still looking down solemnly. “Phil called me that morning and told me that it had happened in the middle of the night. That you were…gone. I couldn’t make myself ask him for details, but he said that you had been protecting someone. And I said that was probably how you would have wanted it to happen—the natural conclusion of how you’d lived.”

Melinda is still forcing every breath she takes, trying to absorb everything. Her mother finally looks up and squeezes her hands.

“I’ve missed you,” she says, eyes still shimmering.

She outlived me.

And suddenly it’s too much.

Melinda pulls her mother into her arms and buries her face in the woman’s shoulder, clinging to the nearest solid thing while she reels from the shock that’s threatening to quickly condense into grief. She can’t remember the last time she hugged her mother, but she’s very conscious of how frail the person in her arms now feels.

She’d be eighty-two this year…

“Lǎolao, tā shì shéi?”

Melinda had completely forgotten there was a third person in the house.
She pulls away and turns towards the voice, seeing the little girl lingering in the doorway of the kitchen, looking confused.

“Halley, ǐguòlái a,” her mother says quickly, wiping her eyes as she beckons the child over.

The girl’s brow pinches, and she stares up at Melinda suspiciously as she pads over on bare feet and tucks herself halfway behind her mother’s leg, who puts a comforting hand on her shoulder.

“Nǐrènshì tā, shì bùshì?” her mother says to the child, gesturing towards Melinda.

*You know her, don’t you?*

The little girl glances over at the refrigerator, and Melinda looks too, unsure how she missed its surface’s contents before. Beneath a pile of child’s artwork, there is a collection of photos stuck with magnets down at the girl’s level, and one is a picture of Melinda with Skye lit up by a golden sunset, a picture Melinda is sure has not been taken yet.

“Tā jiào May, duì ma?” the child asks, looking up at Melinda’s mother again. *She’s May, right?*


Pulling in a difficult breath, Melinda slowly kneels and holds out her hand. She thinks she knows, but…

“This little one,” she says gently in English, forcing what she hopes is a kind smile. “What’s your name?”

The girl is studying her carefully and ignores her hand as she answers. “Halley.”

“Zhēnde ma?” Melinda asks in Chinese, and the girl nods.

Melinda glances up at her mother, feeling a look of disbelief bleeding across her face.

“Is she…”

“Halley Camille Johnson,” her mother says with a nod, not making her finish the question. “She’s almost four.”

Melinda’s chest gets tighter as she looks back at the small girl in front of her. Her hair is a little bit lighter than Skye’s ever was, glinting gold in the daylight trickling in through the skylight in the kitchen ceiling. The shape of her face is different in some places, but there is still so much of her that looks just like another four-year-old Melinda just met…

*Or a slightly older brown-haired girl surprising me in Dad’s house…*

“Halley,” Melinda manages to say. “That’s such a pretty name.”

“I’m named after a comet,” the girl tells her seriously, as if she has said this to many strangers before.

Melinda holds it together and tries to smile as she nods slowly.

“Are you really?”

Halley nods, then looks up at the woman she calls Laolao.

“Can I play with the blocks?” the girl asks, apparently already bored by this visitor.
“Yes, just be careful,” her mother answers, patting the child on the back as she turns to go. Halley makes a beeline for the living room without looking back, and Melinda is sure now, yes, this is the same girl she saw in her father’s guest bedroom back in September…

*How is that possible though? How could she be time-traveling too?*

“She comes to stay with me sometimes when Daisy’s on a mission,” her mother says when Melinda looks back at her to ask another question. “Apparently, we’re well-protected outside of this house, but it helps her to have a familiar face around.”

“How did you meet…how did it start?” Melinda asks, staring at the collection of photographs of Skye and Halley on the fridge. Skye carrying the girl on her shoulders...Skye holding a toddler's hands and helping her walk...Skye holding a tiny baby...

Her mother is digging through her purse as she answers. “You introduced us before…”

She suddenly extracts an ancient flip-phone, opening it and dialing a number.

“I’m calling Daisy. She’d want to talk to you if you’re here…”

“Where…”

“She’s on a mission, but she keeps a burner phone on her in case there’s an emergency here,” her mother says as she holds the phone out to her, the sound of ringing audible.

At first, Melinda doesn’t take it. “Ma, we’re not really speaking right now…” she says with an ache in her chest.

But her mother actually rolls her eyes and pushes the phone into her hand. “Oh, Melinda, obviously that’s all in the past…”

Breath hitching, Melinda raises the phone to her ear just as she hears the call connect.

“Mama?” Skye’s voice says in her ear. “Is everything all right?”

Melinda takes a deep breath.

“Skye?”

“May? Oh my god…” The person on the other side sounds breathless.

“Skye…”

“Oh my god, May…are you…when are you visiting from?”

“2015…” she whispers.

“Oh God, May, I’m sorry…” Skye now sounds tearful. “You probably just found out, didn’t you?”

Melinda’s head starts to go fuzzy. She reaches over and grips her mother’s hand and presses the phone hard against her face, as if she can make it feel less like plastic and more like Skye’s cheek...

“Skye—Daisy…I’m sorry. I’m sorry for leaving. I’m sorry…”

“May, it’s okay, just talk to me, let me hear your voice…”
Melinda looks towards the living room where she can see the child playing. “I just met Halley… she’s so beautiful. My mom says she’s almost four.”

“Yes—she’s amazing. I’m so glad you’re getting to meet her…”

“She’s…I’m so happy for you, Daisy…I think I’ve seen her before…”

Her equilibrium is fading fast, and she grips her mother’s hand harder.

“Daisy, I love you,” Melinda blurts into the phone. “I don’t know how much I said it but I’m sure I should have said it more. I’m so sorry…”

“I love you, May, it’s okay…” Daisy sniffles on the other side.

Melinda’s vision goes blurry.

“I’m going,” she gasps. “I’m sorry. Daisy, I’m sorry.”

“May…”

“I love you. I love you.” She looks at her mother and presses into the phone and repeats it to them both until she disappears.

**October 15, 2015**

**Daisy:**

They’ve been dancing around each other for days, and Daisy hates feeling like a stalker, trying to get a moment alone with May, but she’s also not wanting to press or manipulate. It seems impossible that May could avoid her this long in a base this small, so Daisy knows there’s some intentionality in it.

But then it finally happens, the day after Jemma and Fitz made their chilling discovery, a cold morning when Daisy forces herself out of bed and go do training with Bobbi, take a shower, and then go to the kitchen for breakfast.

She walks through the door into the common area and there is May, tucked in one of the chairs and curled over the conference table, seemingly fast asleep with her head on her folded arms. Bobbi collides with Daisy from behind as she stops short in the doorway, and the blonde wraps her arms around Daisy’s waist to barrel her out of the way.

“Don’t get between me and the coffeepot, Daisy,” Bobbi says, tickling her sides as she moves them both through the doorway. “You know me better than that.”

At that point, May jerks slightly and stirs, turning her head away from the sound. Daisy is sure that Bobbi has noticed the woman too, but she doesn’t comment on it, making a beeline straight for the coffeemaker and pulling down a mug.

“You want a toaster?” the blonde offers, passing Daisy a mug for her own coffee. “I’m going to make a couple for myself.”

Daisy must give herself away by glancing unsubtly at May, who still seems to be sleeping deeply enough to not be aware of her presence—otherwise, Daisy’s certain she would have bolted by now. Bobbi isn’t one for raised eyebrows, she just pulls down a third mug and passes it calmly over.
“You know which tea she likes,” the blonde says quietly. “I’ll make an extra sandwich.”

Daisy takes the cup feeling a little bit ashamed as she glances in the sleeping woman’s direction again.

“It feels like cheating to corner her when she’s sleeping,” she says, not reaching for the kettle.

“You’re not cornering her,” Bobbi dismisses with a calm shake of her head as she sets a skillet on the stove and turns on the burner. “You’re caring for her. Whether she stays is up to her.”

As she picks up the cup of green tea in a trembling hand, it occurs to Daisy that it’s been so long since she was afraid to approach May for any reason. While walking the handful of necessary steps towards the table, Daisy’s mind flashes with memories from 2013, the months when she and May were just getting to know each other, when the person who she now knows so intimately was little more than a prickly pilot who saved her team’s lives again and again.

_We came so far…but now, are we starting there again._

May doesn’t stir as Daisy finally draws up behind her shoulder, and Daisy debates for a moment over simply setting down the cup and backing away or clearing her throat to possibly give May a warning. In the end, she doesn’t have to decide—behind her, Bobbi flips her sandwiches and then sets the skillet back on the stovetop with far more force than Daisy knows is necessary, and the resulting noise causes May to jerk slightly in waking.

This time, she does open her eyes.

Daisy watches the split-second process of May analyzing location and threat level while pulling in a deep breath before her eyes land on Daisy and she goes stiff.

“Tea,” Daisy says quietly, setting the cup on the table beside May’s elbow as the woman sits up. Inside the perimeter of her folded arms, Daisy glimpses a tablet computer, though the screen is dark. “Working late?”

May actually holds her gaze for a long moment, and Daisy is confused by what she sees there. There is a trace of that fear and nervousness that she saw at their first reunion a couple of weeks ago, but it seems almost completely crowded out now by…

_Pain._

“Thank you,” May says quietly, dropping her eyes but reaching for the tea. Daisy watches her take a sip and tries to decide what to say next, but again, Bobbi saves her the suspense.

“Bacon, egg, and cheese toaster for you,” she says, pushing the plate into Daisy’s hands and herding her unsubtly away from the table. “Come on, we’ll eat on the sofa. May, there’s another sandwich in the skillet if you’re hungry.”

She leads Daisy to the sofa, dismissing her annoyed glare with a one-shoulder shrug.

“Wait and see what she does,” the Mockingbird breathes in a low whisper, sounding sure enough of the plan that Daisy doesn’t question her.

They sink into the sofa together to devour their breakfast, and Bobbi keeps a quiet conversation going about everything except the obvious. They’re in the middle of chuckling about Bobbi’s latest test with her new set of boomerang-capable batons when Daisy glimpses May moving out of the corner of her eye. Bobbi doesn’t look, but Daisy lets herself stare as the woman finally rises from her
chair and carries her mug to the kitchenette, adding more water to it from the still-hot kettle. Daisy holds her breath, but then she sees May pull down a plate, and she turns back to Bobbi, almost grinning.

The blonde never breaks her train of thought, but she does wink, and Daisy wants to hug her.

A moment later, May joins them in the sofa area, though it’s on Bobbi’s other side, tucked into the armchair.

“Hope that sandwich is up to par,” Bobbi says as May takes a bite, her eyes on her plate.

“It’s good,” she answers quietly after swallowing, the beginning of a cautious conversation.

Bobbi manages, with skills that Daisy can only envy, to pull a little small talk out of May, a feat that seems to Daisy as impossible as diffusing a bomb but one that Bobbi makes look as casual as unwrapping a birthday present. May doesn’t run, doesn’t give a cold shoulder, and even seems to relax slightly the longer the conversation continues. It’s early enough in the morning that only a few people trickle through the room as long as they sit there, and while she still feels like she’s cheating, Daisy decides to seize the moment as long as it’s there.

“Be right back,” she says, jumping to her feet and meeting Bobbi’s gaze long enough that she’s sure the other woman knows she’s begging her to keep May there until she returns. Afraid to waste any time, Daisy hurries to her room, finding the two objects exactly where they’ve been for months and tucking them in her pockets before hurrying back to the common area.

The two women are right where she left them, and her heart shudders in relief as she takes her place on the sofa again.

Only a couple of minutes after that, Bobbi makes some excuse about needing to go find Fitz and heaves herself out of the sofa, removing the barrier (buffer) between Daisy and May. She sees May’s legs tense as if she’s about to get to her feet and bolt too, but then May visibly overrides the reflex, dropping her eyes after she says goodbye to Bobbi.

A brief silence follows the blonde’s departure, but then May sighs and looks over at Daisy.

“Okay,” the woman says, meeting her eyes with that pained expression again. “Let’s talk.”

For some reason, Daisy’s mind supplies the memory of being fifteen and standing on the streets outside St. Agnes’s, May reappearing for the first time since she’d almost died. A lot of things had changed in the time between them, including her name.

Who would have thought we’d have a rerun of all that…

“I’m sorry,” May says first, a bold opening volley even as she drops her gaze to her hands, which are folded in her lap. “I’m sorry I left the way I did. I was a coward.”

Daisy remains silent, staring steadily at her, and May keeps going.

“I’m sorry I didn’t stay long enough to make sure you were all right. I’m sorry…”

May trails off suddenly, her voice sounding tight, and Daisy sees her purse her lips for a moment before biting out,

“I’m sorry I took your mother away from you.”
“May,” Daisy attempts, unable to stop herself from shifting to the end of the couch closest to May, a movement she still catches her flinching from, but the woman keeps talking, her eyes still downcast.

“I could make excuses, but the fact remains…I told you I wouldn’t hesitate to save you if I could, but I just gave you more pain…”

“Melinda.”

She guesses that this gets May’s attention only because of shock value—in twenty-plus years, she has still never called May by her first name. The woman’s mouth snaps shut as her eyes finally meet Daisy’s, and Daisy holds her gaze seriously before continuing.

“I know you were saving me. I know there wasn’t a better option. And I don’t hold any of it against you.”

May purses her lips again, and Daisy can see a slight shimmer of tears in her eyes. “You should.”

Daisy shakes her head, pursing her own lips. “Tough luck. I don’t.”

May looks down, passing a hand over her eyes. “That’s why I left without…anything. I was sure you wouldn’t want to see me again after what I did.”

“May…” Daisy’s hand lands on the arm of the chair, still trying to reach her but still not close enough.

This time, at least, May doesn’t flinch.

“It hurts that you think that I loved you that little,” Daisy says softly.

May doesn’t look up, doesn’t reach out for Daisy’s hand, and Daisy realizes that there are some things that had happened that day that might make May think those words aren’t true, some things that May still may not understand.

“Jiaying knew you, May,” Daisy blurts out, and May finally looks up, startled. “She saw a picture of you on my phone when I was at Afterlife and got kind of…scary. It seemed like she recognized you from before, and I was afraid that if she saw you, she’d hurt you. That’s why I was trying to keep you away from her.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me?” May asks, a baffled expression frozen on her face.

“That redhead, Alisha,” Daisy says, calling up the memory. “She was tailing me everywhere after I got back to Afterlife, and I was sure she was reporting back to Jiaying, so I didn’t want to tip her off. Maybe if I’d just told you, we could have been on the same page but…”

Now we’ll never know.

May is quiet for a moment, studying her hands again. “How did Jiaying know me?” she finally asks, her gaze flickering back up to Daisy’s, whose heart clenches as she realizes that she has to finally tell May what she knows.

“She…Jiaying was there…in Bahrain.”

She watches this revelation slap May across the face, watches the horror bleed through her features before she looks away, taking a deep breath.

“She didn’t tell me that was how she recognized you,” Daisy continues slowly, “but that’s what I
assumed, since she’d already told me she was there the day everything happened with Katya.”

May looks like she’s just been kicked in the chest.

“She told you about that?”

Daisy feels her heart cracking behind her ribs, but she tells the truth. “She told me that it was an Inhuman woman and her Inhuman daughter… she told me that she went after them, but it was too late, and SHIELD had stepped in to stop them first…”

She can’t make herself say it any more explicitly than that. It would hurt May too much.

“Jiaying also asked me if you had abilities, but I don’t know how she would have known that…”

“What did you say?” May asks, turning her gaze back on Daisy, her brow furrowing.

“Nothing, of course,” Daisy says quickly. “But later, when I came back before SHIELD came, she said something about how she hoped you would come to Afterlife too, but she said it in a way that gave me a really bad feeling. I tried to message you that night and warn you not to come, but it obviously didn’t work…”

May is looking away again, her brow still furrowed, as though she’s tunneling through memories.

“That day we saw each other on the ship,” she eventually says in a low voice, “when she touched me right before I started time traveling, I heard her say ‘You’re not going to do this twice’…”

She trails off, and Daisy shakes her head, wanting to leave those memories behind as quickly as possible.

“I guess we’ll never know why she said that. But maybe that’s for the best.”

May cautiously meets her gaze again, and Daisy tries again to reach for her hand, ready to make her own apologies.

“May… I’m so sorry about what happened to Andrew. He didn’t deserve that, and it’s all my fault…”

May shakes her head. “You’re not responsible for anything your mother did. Don’t do that to yourself.”

“But I brought those books back from Afterlife…”

“Daisy,” May says tiredly, finally touching her hand. “Stop.”

They lapse into a moment of silence that feels the closest to before that anything in the past week has, and Daisy eventually turns her hand up beneath May’s gripping it slightly.

“Don’t disappear again,” she whispers, staring at their joined hands. “Please. I missed you every day you were gone.”

“I missed you too,” May says before Daisy hears her take a deep breath. “And I’m staying with SHIELD. I promise.”

Daisy doesn’t miss the distinction.

Not I’m staying with you.
She makes herself look up, but May is looking down.

“Don't want to hurt you again, Daisy,” she says, as if knowing the question that's coming next.

“Leaving’s all you ever do that hurts me,” Daisy mutters. Harsh words for a harsh truth.

May closes her eyes but doesn't pull her hand away. “I don’t always have a choice.”

“I know. But that time, you did. This time, you do.”

“I promise,” May repeats quietly, “I’m staying as long as I can. But I want you to learn how to be happy without me.”

It feels like a punch in the gut, but Daisy makes herself clarify.

“Do you not want to be together anymore?”

May doesn’t answer.

The silence stretches far too long, and finally, Daisy pulls her hand away. Shifting on the sofa, she pulls the List out of her pocket and unfolds it on the coffee table, sliding it over as close to May as it can be.

“I may not have gotten to choose you before,” Daisy says, looking at the string of dates that had tied her life to May’s long before the other woman knew her name. “And maybe you wouldn’t have chosen me if I didn’t have the history with you that I do. But some way or another, my past is still your future. Our lives are always going to be connected, one way or another.”

“I know,” May whispers, staring at the List. “Oh God, Daisy, I know.”

May slides out of her chair and onto her knees beside the table, pulling a pen out of the drawer beneath it and pulling the List closer. There seems to be something religious in the way she bows her head over the paper as she writes, adding dates to the right side, confessing that she’s still been with Daisy even in the time they've been apart.

When she slides it back over with a penitent look, Daisy sees four more visits have been completed. May has now been to her in Indiana again when she was 9. In NOLA when she was 18 and partying stupidly. One of the visits when Skye was still in St. Agnes’s.

And there, squeezed into the top of the paper, June 1994 now has a date written beside it.

*October 6, 2015.*

The day after May came back to their team.

May seems to know the instant Daisy processes this line, because when Daisy looks up, she’s smiling sadly.

“The first one,” she whispers in a soft, reverent voice.

“Oh God, May, it happened *that* day for you?”

May shakes her head sadly. “I wish I’d been in a better state for you.”

“What was I like?” Daisy asks breathlessly, wanting again to move closer but unable to do more than slide off the sofa and join May on the floor.
“Tiny,” May answers, meeting her eyes. “Precious.”

They’re finally close enough that she could touch May properly if she wanted to, but Daisy checks herself and just reaches carefully for her hand again. This time, May turns her palm face-up, lacing their fingers together.

“I know I’m still your future, your past,” May says, her gaze remaining fixed downwards. “But I don’t think we can be what we were anymore, even if I wanted to.”

“Why not?”

Again, May remains silent, but she can practically hear May's voice saying the words she's heard too many times before--I know, but I can’t tell you--and Daisy's heart pounds, knocking fearfully against her ribs.

What do you know, May?

What’s coming next?

But May’s next words still surprise her.

“You know, Lincoln—“ May pauses, as if gathering courage, “I can tell that he’s mostly here for you. And I can tell you feel something for him too.”

“Something,” Daisy admits. “But…it’s like before you, whenever I tried to be in other relationships. There was only so far I could love someone else, especially when I knew you were my future.”

“But I’m your past, now,” May reminds her, squeezing her hand gently. “And you deserve to be happy.”

Without me.

Daisy knows she could beat this dead horse a while longer, could demand May tell her what she knows about the future, but this isn’t how she wants to spend this precious time she has with May. So instead, she moves her free hand and pulls the other object from her pocket, the other thing she never meant for May to leave behind.

“You haven’t been sleeping,” she says, laying the dreamcatcher on the table in front of May, who gazes at it with a sad smile. “This was a gift. Please keep it.”

May looks back at her, her eyes shimmering, and the sight of those rare tears for a second time this morning is enough to shatter the last of Daisy’s caution. Pulling her hand free of May’s, she reaches for the woman’s shoulder and pulls her gently into her arms.

It’s awkward and a little uncomfortable, since they’re still wedged on the floor between the coffee table and the sofa, but May leans into her willingly enough, settling against her with a surprising amount of heaviness.

Dense as a black hole, a dying star.

Daisy hears her sniffler once, feels a tiny bit of dampness through the fabric of her t-shirt, and she can’t resist pressing a kiss against May’s hair, tightening her grip.

“I love you,” she whispers.
There’s no point in pretending otherwise.

She’s been here before, for too much of the twenty-plus years she’s known her. Time has never been on their side, but she’s learned to make the most of what it gives them. The most of what May can give her.

And apparently, this is all she can right now.

“I love you, too,” May breathes against her heart, and it sounds like a confession.

Daisy holds on tight and tries to tell herself that they’re going to be okay—that she can be okay with just this. Whatever storm is coming next, she won’t let herself waste a moment of any peace they have left before it.

**October 17-18, 2015**

**May:**

Coulson still has blood on his shirt when he staggers back into the base that night. They have to get the story from Mack, who was the one to extract him from Rosalind’s apartment.

“All he said on the ride back was that it was Ward, and he told me to get the interrogation room ready,” Mack tells them with a grim look on his face.

It isn’t long before Coulson calls them one by one into it.

He pools their old Bus team for intel on the Hydra head they just can’t seem to cut off, brushing off all of their attempts at comfort. Before long, they’re all split up, and Fitz and Simmons are abducted on their leg while Coulson, Hunter, and Bobbi are dark on their task, whatever it is. He’s left Mack in charge, so Mack is the one to approve Joey and Lincoln for combat in Coulson’s stead. By nightfall, they’ve all congregated at the location Coulson traced Ward’s phone to—a castle in South England, apparently the place where they’d been able to bring Simmons back a few months ago. Now, the place is absolutely swarming with Hydra soldiers.

“Those are the ATCU Inhuman containment pods,” Daisy exclaims as they look at the heat-signature feeds, pointing to a structure with a dozen fetal-positioned adults literally stacked on one another. “Whatever else we do here, we’ll need to get them out too.”

“Any sign of the big guys?” Mack asks, and May scans the bodies for any familiar shapes.

“Maybe—this is probably whatever they’re doing with the Monolith,” Lincoln says, pointing to a wide room in the castle where a handful of men seem to be moving equipment into place. “I bet Malick and Ward in there.”

“Simmons and Fitz probably are, too,” Mack says, pointing at two figures that look much smaller than the rest of the people in the room. “I bet that’s them.

But suddenly a few heat signatures start to vanish as a few men step towards the center of the room. Including either Fitz or Simmons.

“Did they just open another portal?” Daisy says disbelievingly. “How’d they pull that off?”

A blur of light flashes down the screen, disappearing into the same void, and they all blink twice.
“Did everyone else see that?” Joey says first. “What was that?”

“May,” Bobbi’s voice suddenly comes through her earpiece. “We’re coming in, about to dock on Zephyr One.”

“Bobbi, what’s your status?” Mack says into his own comm.

“Ah,” Hunter’s voice comes through, “Coulson just jumped out of the plane. I think he made it down to the castle and into the portal.”

**Daisy:**

Mack orders her and May to take Lincoln and Joey in to find their people and rescue the Inhumans. Remembering the water she’d heard in the Monolith’s room the last time they were at this castle, Daisy uses satellites to find the back door, an aqueduct sourced deep in the surrounding woods. Joey melts the grate, and they duck into the darkness with Mack, Bobbi, and Hunter before splitting off to get up into the fresh air again.

The area outside the castle is teeming with soldiers, and Lincoln busts the generators to plunge the area into darkness before they make their move.

Joey still seems uncertain with his powers, but Lincoln seems as ruthless as ever as they blast their way through tents, looking for Simmons and signs of other Inhumans. She doesn’t mean to lose May, but she’s barely realized that the woman is gone before the woman’s voice comes in over comms.

“Daisy, I’ve got Simmons. Headed your way now.”

She leads Lincoln and the proud-to-be-bulletproof Joey through an underground passage into the castle where Bobbi, Hunter, and Mack have already secured the room with the portal. Daisy throws her arms around Jemma as she climbs up the ladder a few minutes later, hustling her through the halls to the place where Mack is trying to figure out the new system Hydra has rigged up with the monolith stones.

“Is that counting down to a good thing, or a bad thing?” Lincoln asks, pointing to a timer that has less than an hour left on it.

“It’s counting down to when the portal will open again,” Jemma says. “The rocks are configured so that they’ll activate at the designated time.”

“So that’s a good thing?” Daisy prompts.

“Depends if Fitz can locate the extraction point in time and who or what is with him,” Jemma says.

“He’ll make it,” Bobbi says firmly. “Coulson’s there too.”

“Yes, but Ward’s mission is to——”

“Where’s May?” Mack asks suddenly.

“Dr. Garner is on the premises,” Jemma says, looking pained. “He’s actually the one who saved me.”

“May must have gone back for him,” Daisy realizes, her heart sinking slightly.
“To do what?” Lincoln mutters.

“That probably depends on what she finds,” Mack says.

“I’ll go catch up with her,” Daisy says, taking two steps backward. “Lash didn’t hurt her last time, but she’s shot him since then…”

She’s halfway down the tunnel when she sees a flashlight beam approaching and the flash of a SHIELD logo behind it.

“May!” she shouts as they rush towards each other. “Did you find Andrew?”

“No,” May grimaces as she gets closer, catching Daisy’s arm and spinning her back the way they came. “And we won’t get to bring any more Inhumans back today either.”

May:

Minutes are left on the timer and Hydra soldiers are beating against their barricaded doors when Mack gives her the order.

“Get everyone through the tunnel and back up to Zephyr One!” he says, holding her gaze as firmly as he’s holding his rifle. “I’m going to stay here until the last possible second for Coulson, Fitz, and Will. Now if Hydra gets in, or that alien thing gets inside here, you light this compound up with every missile inside the plane.”

“What?” Daisy immediately protests. “No! I’m not leaving anyone here.”

“If I don’t get out,” Mack goes on, ignoring her, “May’s the new director. That’s what Coulson would want.”

Daisy continues to insist that she should stay to keep the portal open, ignoring everyone’s protests. May cuts through all of them, knowing they’re losing time they don’t have.

“Daisy should stay,” May says, pulling Mack’s gaze back to her. “She’s the best chance anyone has of getting out safely.”

And probably not for the reason you think.

Another explosion from outside rocks the room, and Mack runs out of patience.

“Daisy stays—everyone else to the jet!”

Zephyr One is still airborne, and Bobbi throws herself into the co-pilot’s seat of the quinjet as their group makes it out to rejoin the sky-high team.

“Listen up,” May says as they get back to the control center of the massive plane. “All weapons systems online, then take us up to 20,000 feet.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Davis says from his position at a monitor, and Bobbi pulls up the scan of the place they left Mack and Daisy.

“Looks like Hydra’s inside the castle,” she says gravely. Glancing up, she locks eyes with May. “They’re gonna make it, right?”
May can’t speak, but she nods, waiting.

By her count, there’s less than two minutes left on the timer.

*But we are the team that does the impossible daily.*

Time runs out, and she can see on the infrared channel the portal reopening just as Hydra breaks through a barrier and gets closer to the place they left their people.

“All weapons systems, go hot!” she orders, her heart threatening to climb up her throat. *Come on Daisy, come on, Phil, get out of there…*

On the screen, Daisy’s figure seems to collapse. Two figures suddenly reappear on the infrared channel, and Mack’s voice comes through their comms with an order.

“Do it May! Now!”

May takes a deep breath, her finger hesitating on the button.

*Daisy has years ahead of her, she assures herself. She’ll make it out somehow…*

She hits *deploy*, and their feed of the castle disappears as the missiles impact and rend it to rubble.

For the awful stretch of seconds following, May holds her breath, unable to look up at Simmons, at Bobbi, at Lincoln…

But then,

“Open the doors,” Mack’s voice comes through the comms. “I’m bringing ‘em in.”

They’re all down in the cargo hold by the time the lower doors close beneath the escape pod and the people inside are coming out.

Daisy appears first, blood smeared on her face like a hastily-cleaned nosebleed, but she is smiling as she takes a few steps towards them. May feels herself smiling too, but when Lincoln steps in front of her, meeting Daisy in the middle, May doesn’t get in line. She hangs back and watches Bobbi hug Mack in relief and sees Simmons racing up to the window of the pod even as Fitz exits on the other side. She watches him pull her into an apologetic hug as the girl breaks down in tears, mourning the person they weren’t able to save. In her periphery, Lincoln kisses Daisy, and May deliberately looks forward, watching the last person emerge from the pod.

She knows that look in his eyes. She’s seen it in the mirror for years.

So May finally makes the first move, takes the few steps necessary to reach him and pull him into her arms. Coulson holds her back hollowly, and May knows that no matter what’s coming, no matter how much time she has left, there’s still work to do.

Chapter End Notes

Warnings: implied/referenced major character death (all of this is in May's first section)

Okay, now to all readers, listen carefully because I'm only going to say this once: MAY
AND DAISY ARE GOING TO GET A HAPPY ENDING (and not in some cop-out afterlife sense). I did not sink 300,000+ words and 2 years of my life on this story to leave them separated in any way. I know what it looks like, I know this looks like the worst possible ending coming, and yeah, there is (even more) pain ahead. But I know what I'm doing, and I hope you can trust me that I'm going to bring these two together in the end.

That said, this chapter obviously had some bombshells. You're supposed to be left with questions. Feel free to ask away, but there are some cards I'm not going to show just yet and I will just be answering those questions with future chapters (we may only have about five or six left!).

The name Halley comes from Halley's comet, but Mr. Halley was super inconsistent with the spelling of his name, and it's not clear whether the name should rhyme with 'valley' or 'daily'. So you can read it either way in your head.

Also the first Chinese you hear May's mom and Halley speaking is just "take your shoes off and then take this bag to the bathroom" and the little girl says okay. Then when she comes back in later, she asks Laolao (the term for your maternal grandmother) who the person she's talking to is. Everything else is translated in italics following the phrase.
Chapter Notes

I don't even know what to say here except sorry

See the end of the chapter for more notes

November 2015—January 2016: May is 46, Daisy is 27

The easiest thing to do would be to pull away. To step back and put as much distance between her and her team as possible, to do the simplest thing to make the inevitable the tiniest bit easier for everyone.

But she doesn’t let herself do that over the next few months, no matter how much she wants to.

She’s still an agent, and there’s still work to do.

Lincoln isn’t the only new agent that needs to be trained—Coulson has called in a whole new batch of recruits in from all over the country, and she’s the most seasoned Specialist available to get them field-ready. She agrees to the assignment and organizes their training program, sets up their teams, and does her best.

She also picks out three to teach how to fly the Zephyr.

Coulson avoids all of them for a few days after the mission on that planet, but May doesn’t let him keep that up for long. He doesn’t have to tell her the details for her to know how everything must have ended on that planet, and he knows how it feels to come back from a situation like that—even without time travel involved, it’s not hard to spiral inside yourself in the days and feelings that follow. When it was her, Coulson and Andrew had done their best to keep her from running off the rails in the aftermath of Bahrain, but in the end, she’d still managed to effectively sever their connections to her, an effort they both eventually allowed. Phil is not the same kind of person, she knows, but she still isn’t willing to risk the worst, not when so much still depends on him.

Within a few days, he has a new prosthetic hand, a custom piece from Fitz and his team that looks exactly like its live partner on his other wrist. This one comes with even more secret bells and whistles too, and that's what Coulson tries to distract her with every time they sit alone together off the clock.

“It’s got an x-ray beam in the palm,” he says, demonstrating the function by shining it on the wall opposite the sofa in his study. “And he says there’s a taser in one of the fingers, but I forgot which one and I’m afraid to find out by accident…”

“You don’t have to talk about what happened,” she says the one time she calls his bluff. “But I’m here if you want to.”

He won’t look at her, and he only says one thing.

“I don’t know what happened on that planet.”

“I do,” she says quietly. “You joined the Cavalry.”
She’s there a couple of days later when he meets with POTUS and learns that General Talbot has been named the new head of the ATCU, and as teeth-grinding as she and Coulson both find it, it could be worse—could be someone new and annoying.

She hasn’t forgotten about Andrew either—when she catches Simmons in the shooting range punishing herself for letting the monster loose, May lets her in on the search she’s been running on her own time, hoping to track Lash down before he does any more damage, Inhuman or otherwise.

And throughout all of that is Daisy.

It doesn’t feel like they’re trying to avoid each other anymore, but the absence of what used to be still seems to loom over their heads throughout every interaction they share, business or otherwise. May can tell Daisy is trying hard to not make things awkward, trying hard not to press or ask for any more than May is offering, but unfortunately for both of them, May knows her too well by now for anything to be transparent. She can see Daisy missing her a dozen ways in every moment.

But this is better for both of them.

For her part, May has been doing her best as well to maintain her usual exterior, to not tip anyone off to the things she now knows, but she’s sure if anyone were to see through it, it would be Daisy or Phil.

So she doesn’t go with Daisy to Colombia when reports come in about some suspicious activity that sounds an awful lot like a new Inhuman. She just gets to hear the reports later that it’s a woman who’s got superspeed and that she’s willing to cooperate with SHIELD. They’ve tagged her with a GPS bracelet and left her on her own, and Daisy seems plenty cheerful for the next few days, after her first successful Inhuman mission since Joey.

There was a rotten one down there too, May reads in the debriefing Daisy sent to Coulson, which he forwarded to her. Some dude with stun-gun eyes or something like that. Put Bobbi and Hunter out for a while. But he hopefully won’t be causing too much trouble anymore, now that Joey melted the douche’s sunglasses to his face, just before he was abducted by some kind of claw-machine aircraft that could only belong to Hydra.

May smirks to herself as she reads and makes a mental note to make sure Daisy gets a refresher on professional language and tone for official reports.

You’re not her SO anymore, a nagging voice in the back of her head reminds her.

May looks around the space she’s assigned herself to, a bedroom that bears nothing of the time that was except for the dreamcatcher that hangs from the headboard, and sighs sadly.

It’s true both ways.

Christmas comes and goes without much fanfare, and it seems the team has Bobbi to thank for whatever minimal decorations and festivities are present on December twenty-fifth. Talbot, Malick, and their team finally intersect at a mission in Taiwan just a few days after that though, a “symposium” where Important People plan to talk about the so-called global Inhuman threat. May, Bobbi, and Hunter are the undercover team, and when Malick makes a surprise appearance at the meeting, Bobbi calls an audible and manages to hide on his plane with Hunter, following him all the way to Russia.

That’s where things get messy.

May and Coulson first rush back to base to pick up the rest of the team, and May can tell by the way
Daisy is now avoiding eye contact with her that something must have finally happened with Lincoln. He’s not there, thankfully—off at their base in New York finishing his training—but it doesn’t seem to make any difference. Daisy still won’t meet her eyes.

Things go south fast at the center in Russia—Malick gets off their radar, but they discover a Russian general who happens to be Inhuman. The garden variety that can be in two places at once—a solid body and an impossibly solid shadow. Daisy is nearly killed by the second, saved only when Bobbi puts two very deliberate bullets in the first.

May is not behind the glass as Bobbi and Hunter are interrogated for over twenty-four hours—Coulson corrals the team in the Zephyr and only goes in himself when POTUS shows up. May tries not to hope for the best as she waits for his return, but she’s still shocked to see him come back alone.

“There were no good options—I had to make a deal,” Coulson explains over the confused questions and protests of the entire team. “They walk free, but they cannot be agents. It was all we could do to keep them from being executed.”

Daisy, Jemma, and even Fitz all look stricken, but Mack looks like he’s in complete shock.

“We’re never going to see them again?” Daisy asks slowly, reality sinking in.

“I didn’t say that.”

Less than a week later, they’re all together again at a bar in Phoenix, although together might not be quite the right word. The remaining members of their team are scattered throughout the establishment, actively pretending to not know each other as six shots land on Bobbi and Hunter’s table in a spy’s goodbye. May doesn’t cry when Bobbi meets her eyes through the crowd and raises her glass, but Jemma and Daisy both have tears rolling down their cheeks before their empty glasses touch their tables again. Fitz follows Jemma out after that, and May falls in step behind Daisy when she heads for the exit a minute later.

They walk in opposite directions once they’re out the door, both headed for the rendezvous hotel but supposedly taking separate routes back, hoping to avoid any tails that may have noticed their presence so close to their former teammates. May isn’t surprised, however, when Daisy falls into step beside her again only a couple of blocks away from the bar. She’s still sniffing, and May brushes Daisy’s shoulder once in subtle comfort, though she doesn’t reach for the girl’s hand like she once might have.

As they cross a pedestrian bridge over a six-lane road a few minutes later, Daisy suddenly pulls up short, pressing a fist to her eyes.

“I’m so tired of this,” she eventually chokes out after May turns back towards her. “This is so unfair…”

And in the space that follows, May hears the rest.

I’m so tired of people leaving...I’m so tired of being left...I’m so tired of losing people.

May knows that she doesn’t have words that can make this any better, especially not in the face of the loss she knows is still ahead, so she says nothing as she pulls Daisy gently forward and wraps her in a gentle embrace. She expects the girl to fold against her, to take a moment and pull herself together before they keep going, but Daisy surprises her by turning stiff against the embrace, raising head and meeting May’s eyes.

“I know you don’t want to tell me whatever it is that you know is coming…” Daisy says, holding her
gaze sternly even though her voice still gurgles with reined-in tears. “But I need you to promise me something.”

May’s stomach swoops, but she nods once, feeling Daisy’s hands land on her sides, holding her in place, keeping her here.

“If you know…that you’re going to…leave…”

Daisy ducks her head for a moment, and May grits her teeth, afraid of what she’s about to hear.

“Promise me, May…” Daisy says, speaking towards the ground between them, “you have to tell me when it’s time to say goodbye. Don’t do it like last time—sudden and silent. And don’t do it like this, all noble and brave. You deserve better than that…”

You owe me this.

May knows Daisy wants her to deny it. Wants to hear reassurance that that’s not where this is all headed, that it may lie in their future but that May doesn’t know about it yet…

But her silence betrays her in the too-long moment that follows where she can’t decide what to say, and May eventually just slips her hands gently to Daisy’s neck, bowing her head so that her forehead presses against Daisy’s hair.

“I promise,” she whispers, and leaves it at that.

Now Daisy does crumble, so May pulls her into her arms.

They remain in limbo on the midpoint of the bridge as she holds Daisy while she cries, thinking of all the promises she’s broken, all the past promises she will break again in this inevitable future. City lights fight back against the press of night, but May can still make out a few stars above them, staring down indifferently, unmoved by all the pain on their pinprick of the planet. Pain Melinda has always wanted to assign to the universe, but that she has always known is punishment for her actions alone.

She had left Andrew before so that he wouldn’t get sucked into the black hole with her. She had pushed Coulson away for years for the same reason. And here in her arms is the reason why—she could have saved Daisy from all this if she had only held her ground and not let her in.

No, an unbidden thought reminds her. If you’re the comet, then she’s the star. This has only ever been inevitable.

Daisy is finally just sniffling when she buries her face in May’s neck and breathes, and May knows she should push her back, that she can stand on her own now, but she hesitates just a second too long, not ready to let go.

So she can admit that it’s partly her fault when Daisy raises her head and kisses her, and May tries to be gentle even as she pushes the girl firmly back after only a second. It’s not that she wants to withhold anything she has left to give—it’s that there is another person in Daisy’s life now, a person May has a feeling will be in her life longer than she can be, and she refuses to become any more of a wedge between them.

Daisy remains close even after May breaks the kiss, and when their eyes finally meet again, May can tell she understands.

“You promise,” Daisy repeats in a whisper.
May nods. “I promise.”

March 30, 2016

Daisy:

Bobbi and Hunter have been gone for two months and Lincoln has been back from the Cocoon for nearly two weeks when they get the report from the Communications team.

“A 911 call out of Dyker Heights, New York,” Coulson explains as Daisy, Lincoln, May, congregate on the airborne Zephyr. It’s an awkward group for her, to be sure. But since they’re suddenly down three specialists, she understands that Coulson’s options for the op were limited. “The caller mentioned you by name and said Hydra was coming to kill him.”

Daisy has never seen the man in the picture before, but all four of them are on the quinjet that goes down to investigate. NYPD is already on-site talking to the shop owner, but the man immediately reacts as she climbs out of the car.

“There she is! That’s her,” he says, approaching her quickly, and the policemen turn suspiciously in her direction.

“Who are you?” one asks.

“Daisy Johnson, ATCU,” she answers before turning her gaze on the civilian. “Edwin, how did you know my name when you called 911?”

“Because I heard you say it just now,” he says, not really making anything clearer.

“What are you saying?” she asks.

“I saw you—this moment—talking to the cops, all of it,” the man says, his hands fluttering uselessly. “Charles, the crazy homeless guy who lives in the alley—he must have put a curse on me. He made me see this!”

“I’ll go check that out,” Coulson says, moving off in the direction of the alley where Daisy can see a man with a bushy gray beard trying to stay out of sight.

“You’ve got to help me,” Edwin says after Coulson. “They’re after me!”

“We will protect you,” Daisy says, barring him from running after Coulson. “But how did you know that it was Hydra who’s coming?”

“Because that’s what she’ll yell when they come out of the sky,” Edwin says, pointing at May.

The sound of chopper blades suddenly blows up behind them, and they all turn.

May’s gun is already drawn.

“Hydra!” she shouts, aiming towards the aircraft as they all race for cover.

Gunfire rings out around them, and missiles from the chopper turn two police cruisers into fireballs. Daisy hauls the shop owner behind a third cruiser as the aircraft bears down on them, and he turns towards her with a look of terrified realization.
“Daisy,” he says in an almost amazed tone, “this is where I die.”

Another hail of bullets rains down against the cruiser, and this time, the man falls dead.

Realization surges through her, and as soon as the gunfire stops, Daisy leaps to her feet, racing towards Coulson.

“That man’s an Inhuman!” she shouts, blowing past him. “Hydra’s after him!”

She spots the grizzled man standing at the end of the alley, seeming unsure which direction to run as she sprints towards him…

The same claw-machine device that grabbed the laser-eyes-guy in Colombia suddenly drops down from the Hydra aircraft and traps the man in a net. Daisy is close enough to grab his hand as the thing hauls him up…

She suddenly can barely breathe.

Images flash through her mind, the only things she is aware of, freezing her staring up at the sky as the chopper carries the man away.

By the time she’s conscious of anything else, she’s on her knees on the asphalt, and Coulson, May, and Lincoln are all gathered around her.

“What’s wrong?” Lincoln asks as May calls for medical.

With trembling fingers, Daisy picks up a tiny, hand-carved bird from the ground. The images linger, and she finally understands.

“It hasn’t happened yet.”

May:

“I saw the future.”

They had damage control to do, so Coulson had sent Lincoln to take Daisy back to the hidden quinjet while he and May took care of business. Daisy was still acting a little dazed when May boarded the plane again with Coulson, and Lincoln was keeping close, hovering over her with a worried expression. So May was a little startled when Daisy suddenly cornered her alone after they had returned to the Zephyr, hauling her into one of the lavatories and locking the door.

“What are you talking about?” May asked, confused by the seriousness with which Daisy was staring at her in the dim light.

“When I touched that man, trying to help him…” Daisy says, pantomiming catching the man’s hand as he was hauled upwards by the Hydra craft. “I saw…images. Flashes of different things that I’ve never seen before. Our team, but also a woman I don’t know…and Malick…and I’m sure that it’s what’s about to happen.”

“You think it was the future?” May repeats. “How could you know that? It could have just been the man creating images in your mind…”

“No, this was…I could just feel it,” Daisy insists. “This is something real, something that’s coming. I just don’t know how, or when…”
May stares at her, reading the seriousness in Daisy’s eyes, desperation shaded with panic.

*It’s not the same. It can’t be the same thing…*

But there’s an Inhuman outbreak after all, so anything’s possible.

“So what did you see?”

They agree that she ought to tell everyone again when they’re all back at base, especially since it seems like the images showcased nearly everyone—Lincoln’s face covered in blood, Fitz and Jemma holding hands in falling snow, Coulson firing a gun directly at Daisy…not to mention the homeless man dying on the ground in front of her at the end.

When she’s finished, there is only silence around the conference table for nearly a minute, until Simmons finally breaks it.

“You’re sure it was the future?”

Behind the ice pack she’s holding against her forehead, Daisy nods silently. May stands at the other end of the table, her arms folded and face set.

“And Coulson shoots you?” Fitz repeats.

“Yeah,” Daisy says, lowering the ice pack. “But maybe we can change it. Reverse-engineer the visions, figure out where it went down, get there ahead of it, and save the poor man…”

“You can’t,” Fitz cuts her off. “Fourth-dimensionally speaking, is all. If you saw the future, then that’s the future.”

Only Fitz and Coulson’s gazes shift in May’s direction, but May knows it’s only because Simmons and Daisy have more self-control.

“I don’t want to believe that,” Daisy goes on, undeterred. “I can’t explain how it felt, but it was awful. I was inches away from him. I have to save him.”

“Maybe you’re meant to save him,” Lincoln suggests. “If Daisy can remember details about the location and we get there in time—”

“Guys,” Fitz interrupts. “There is no time—she glimpsed the fourth-dimension. Time is an illusion. It’s how we perceive the fourth dimension…Simmons…” he trails off, looking desperately at his partner.

“It’s mathematics,” she explains, looking like she wishes she didn’t understand. “He’s talking about space-time.”

Fitz tries to make it clearer with an example of a line on a stack of copy paper, but it only seems to frustrate Daisy more.

“I don’t believe that the future can’t be changed,” she says firmly, and May looks deliberately away from her. “There has to be some way…”

“May…” Fitz calls desperately for backup, apparently remembering too late that Lincoln is sitting right there and is the only person in the room who still doesn’t know her secret…

“You have anything to add?” Coulson finishes for him, but May can’t make herself face him or Daisy as she answers.
“Fitz is right,” she says towards an empty corner of the room. “When you see the future, it’s the future.”

Another silence stretches after her words, but then Coulson gets to his feet.

“If what May and Fitz are saying is true, then the only way that we can guarantee that we change the outcome is not let Daisy out of the base.”

She, of course, protests immediately, jumping to her feet as well.

“What? No! I have to go help him.”

“The one thing we know for certain is that Daisy was in the center of these visions,” Coulson says, “whereas May doesn’t appear in any of them. So we send her instead.”

Daisy continues to protest, Fitz seems resigned to the fact that Coulson’s still not listening to him, but it’s Jemma’s beseeching gaze that makes May finally speak up.

“Daisy won’t die today.”

Everyone turns to her, falling silent. May still can’t make herself meet anyone’s eyes, but she throws down the truth that she knows will be believed.

“Maybe Coulson will shoot at her, maybe Lincoln will get an injury, maybe all these things will happen…but Daisy won’t die today. And neither will I. So send us both.”

She feels everyone turn towards Coulson, waiting for his answer, and only then can May look up, meeting his heavy gaze.

With one look, she can tell he believes her.

“Okay. Get everything ready that you can then.”

Their search eventually brings in the wife of the missing man, who explains the terragenisis that led to his ability and confirms that every death he’s shown someone has indeed come true. Daisy dictates to a room full of agents exactly how her break-in to the security hub will go, and she and May drill the event as if they’ll be there together—four hands are better than two, after all. They get a red alert that Malick has been spotted entering a building that belongs to a company called Transia, which Daisy confirms is the place they saw from her visions. She and Daisy gather their skeleton team and prepare to board a quinjet, but just then, the base’s perimeter alarm goes off, and a few minutes later, Andrew is marched into the base in shackles.

“He turned himself in,” one of the agents holding him says.

“Why?” May says through gritted teeth, unable to say anything else.

“Lash is taking over,” Andrew says, staring steadily at her. “I came to say goodbye.”

Coulson says she has to stay back then, and May protests as strongly as she can without coming to blows.

“It’s okay, May, I can do this myself,” Daisy insists at her shoulder. “You should stay…”

“We prepared to do this together,” May reminds her. “If you go in by yourself—“

“May, this could be the last time you’ll ever get to talk to the Andrew you knew,” Coulson reminds
her. “If you don’t stay back and say goodbye, you will regret it for the rest of your life.”

“Don’t you tell me about my future!” May snarls, rounding furiously on him. In her periphery, she Daisy take a deep breath, looking like her heart is breaking.

“May,” she exhales. “Say goodbye. He deserves at least that much.”

She still wants to fight it, but she knows that Daisy is right. Before they part ways in the hallways, however, the girl tugs her over to the side.

“Are you going to be okay?” she asks, staring hard at May while she avoids her eyes.

“Are you?” May returns, and Daisy puts her hand on May’s arm, pulling her gaze up.

“What you said about not being able to change the future…do you really believe it?” Daisy asks, the answer she wants written all over her features, and May holds herself back from stating the obvious.

You think with all the times I’ve gone back to Bahrain, I would have let it keep happening if I could have stopped it? You think for all the times I’ve gone back to our team before Hydra happened, I wouldn’t have said something if I could have? You think I would have let Andrew marry me? Have let you try to kill yourself? Have let myself be an idiot and waste a single minute of the time I had…

But Daisy doesn’t need May to tell her all this. She needs hope. And May has already decided to not withhold any good things that she has left to give.

“I can’t change my future, Daisy, because it’s already my past. But maybe, just maybe, you can change yours.”

Daisy’s hand is still on her arm, and May hesitates, knowing that this is when they would normally have kissed each other goodbye.

This time, however, May just reaches out and grips the girl’s hand.

“Come back safe,” she says quietly.

“I love you,” Daisy whispers back, being far braver than May could ever hope to be.

Daisy:

Beating the security team at Transia is practically a cakewalk after all the times she and May practiced it before she left, but the part where Coulson shoots at her is actually him shooting the man behind the one-way glass who just pulled the alarm on her.

“You go find Malick and save Charles,” he says, hustling her out the door as he reloads his gun.

“I’m going to go find Grant Ward. Cause this day just got weirder.”

She races up to the roof and sees Hydra soldiers leading Charles towards a helicopter, exactly as she saw in her vision, but then out of nowhere, Malick lays into her with a punch leveled up by a fist made of metal. She tries to send a pulse at him with her powers but misses, blowing out a lamp beneath the billboard above her and starting a fire on it. The mechanical arms beat her across the head again and again, harder hits than she has ever taken in her life, and she’s quickly too dazed to even raise her arms to even defend herself.
“Time to say goodbye,” Malick sneers above her, and she hears the whir of his arm brace powering up…

She braces herself for the blow but it never comes. When she manages to crack her eyes open, she sees Malick frozen with Charles’s hand against his face, senseless with a vision that Daisy can’t see too. But then Malick spins and grabs Charles by the throat, and Daisy hears a sickening crunch. Finally, she is able to raise her hand and aim correctly.

Malick slams into the brick wall behind him, the suit powering down as the hydraulics fritz out. She knows that she ought to hit him with another blast, but Daisy can barely breathe around the blood in her mouth.

Charles collapses beside her, gasping for breath around a broken throat, and Daisy fumbles for the little robin in her pocket, the one she brought to give back to him after she saved him. Charles smiles when he sees it, fingers fumbling over the toy.

“I made this for my daughter,” he whispers, fingertips fanning over the small bird. “I couldn’t bear to leave them, but I had to protect Robin from this.”

“You did,” Daisy assures him. “And we’ll do that too. I’ll protect her. I’ll take care of her. Always.”

She touches his hand so that he’ll know she means it.

The earth from space, the controls of a stranded plane, spheres of blood floating in zero gravity. A gold cross necklace. The shoulder of someone wearing the SHIELD logo…and then the end as the ship explodes.

She comes back to herself on the ground, gasping and horrified.

“May!” she chokes out, knowing immediately who it must be…

“I’m so sorry,” Charles whispers beside her, the last words he’ll ever say.

April 2, 2016

May:

She was there when Daisy was helped off the plane when the team got back from Transia. Coulson was bearing most of the girl’s weight, and though she was conscious, the fight she’d been through had obviously gotten the best of her. Lincoln too was bearing a not-insignificant head injury, but after the medical team patched them up and kept them overnight to monitor for concussions, Coulson had ordered them both to rest while everyone else followed up with the other bombshell from the day—Grant Ward.

For her part, May doesn’t have much to contribute. She and Coulson have agreed to keep Lash contained sublevel for the time being, since a long-term plan isn’t as pressing as figuring out why their supposed-to-be-dead former teammate and nemesis is walking around alive.

“You said you killed him,” May sighs, staring at the security footage from Transia on Coulson’s wall where Grant Ward’s face stares coolly back.

“I did,” Coulson sighs right back.
“Well you didn’t kill him hard enough,” May grumbles, glaring at the picture on the wall. “So what the hell is this?”

The science team is working overtime trying to make sense of the disturbing human remains that were also found on the scene, and Coulson calls Trip in from the Iliad to pick up the slack while Mack and Daisy recover. Since Lincoln has been hovering around Daisy constantly since their release from medical, including staying in her room every night, May doesn’t try hard to visit, telling herself that Daisy just needs rest and painkillers for now. Instead, May doubles down on tai chi, trying to bottle the emotions of the past few days and anchor herself in the present. It feels like the only way she can really help her team at this point.

On the second evening, however, Lincoln finds her in the training room.

“Daisy’s asking for you,” he says when May finally stops laying into her punching bag and acknowledges him. “Said I should look for you down here.”

May is breathing hard and a little embarrassed by it, so she faces the bag again. “She coherent? Or still a little loopy?”

“She’s doing her best,” Lincoln answers drily. “Can I tell her that you’ll stop by later?”

May moves against the bag in one of her strongest combinations, sending it swinging. “Yes.”

She says nothing else, and Lincoln eventually takes the hint, leaving her alone again.

Thankfully, Daisy is alone when May knocks on the slightly-ajar door to the room that was once theirs. The girl is stretched out on her bed with the laptop open beside her, her face a collage of colors around the taped-up gashes.

“I’d say you should see the other guy,” Daisy attempts as May walks in, closing the door behind her, “but I’d just be lying. I don’t think I even gave him a bloody nose.”

“They have you on some good meds?” May asks, approaching the bed and trying not to cringe at the extent of bruising across Daisy’s face. Her nose still looks a little swollen, and it sounds like she’s trying not to move her jaw too much as she talks, barely opening her mouth.

“Jemma’s giving me the good stuff,” Daisy mumbles, pulling her laptop in closer and patting the space on the bed beside her.

“I’d say you should see the other guy,” Daisy attempts as May walks in, closing the door behind her, “but I’d just be lying. I don’t think I even gave him a bloody nose.”

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“Jemma’s giving me the good stuff,” Daisy mumbles, pulling her laptop in closer and patting the space on the bed beside her.

“From what I heard, you’re lucky you didn’t get a broken jaw,” May says, climbing onto the side of the mattress that used to be hers. “Or lose a few teeth.”

Daisy only grumbles at the thought, squirming on the bed until her head comes to rest on May’s thigh. “I’m still glad it was me and not you, though,” she says. “It was only because I had my powers that I made it out alive.”

May doesn’t have anything to say in response to this, just hesitantly lays her hand on Daisy’s shoulder before moving her fingertips to comb carefully through the girl’s hair. She glances around the room and sees the changes made since she last lived in it—the photos pulled off the walls, the clutter that now lives on every surface, the men’s shoes on the floor…

“I’m really sorry about Andrew,” Daisy says quietly from her knee, and May looks down to see the girl staring solemnly up at her. “I wish the cure had worked.”

May thinks of the solution Simmons had given Andrew intravenously, and admitted Hail Mary in the

face of the circumstances.

“Simmons told me what happened,” Daisy goes on, her eyes leaving May’s with a glimpse of guilt. “And…well, I wanted to know…”

She trails off, then turns the laptop by her knees to face them both. A she wakes the screen, May sees her open a tab from her taskbar—the security feed from the compartment Lash has been in. In the frame it’s paused on, Andrew—still himself—is sitting on the bed, and May is sitting on a bench across from him.

Their last conversation.

“I…I guess I should have thought it through,” Daisy says apologetically from beneath her, “but…well, I watched it.”

Daisy’s hand moves to unpause the video, and May takes a deep breath, realizing what she must referring to.

“So…now we wait and see, I guess,” the Melinda on screen says as Andrew removes the needle from his arm.

“Sorry to drag you away. It looked like you all were prepping for a mission.”

“Daisy will be okay.”

“But you’re worried.”

“She’s convinced that she can change the future.”

“And I know where you stand on that.”

There is a moment of silence, and then that May takes a deep breath too.

“Drew, I should probably tell you, in case this is my last chance…I traveled a couple of months ago to the future. I know when I’m going to die. It’s not that far away.”

Above Daisy, May closes her eyes.

“I’m so sorry,” she hears Andrew say. “I guess we both know how this feels, then.”

“I do,” May hears herself say. “And I’m glad we have a chance to…”

Andrew suddenly leaps to his feet and rushes to the containment module.

Daisy pauses the video and closes her laptop. For a long moment, neither of them say anything, but May waits, knowing what question is coming.

“So you do know,” the girl eventually whispers, not looking up at her.

May squeezes Daisy’s shoulder gently.

“I haven’t told anyone else,” she whispers back.

Against her, Daisy pulls in a deep breath and drags a hand over her face, but not before May feels a bead of dampness through the fabric of her jeans.
“Do you know how?”

May shakes her head, then, remembering that Daisy isn’t looking, says, “No. Just when.”

One of Daisy’s hands moves to cover May’s, holding her in place against her shoulder.

“Remember what you promised me?” the girl says in a trembling voice, still not facing her.

May moves her hand slightly so that her fingers can lace with Daisy’s.

“I do.”

The air is thick with everything they aren’t saying, but May just remains immobile, very conscious of each breath they take. A part of her wants to lie down with Daisy and pull her into her arms, to lock the door and stay there until time runs out. Part of her wants to grab the girl by the hand and haul her to a jet, to fly them both as far away from the looming destiny as possible, to attempt the impossible and try to change the future…

But that’s not the way things will go, May is sure of it. Whether or not the world feels as important right now, they both care too much—about their team, if nothing else—to hide when they could help. May knows the wheel will turn eventually—they’ll get some intel, a lead, a hit, and they’ll go out with their team to shield a thankless world from an unprecedented threat…

But for now, at least, May knows they can allow themselves this.

They’ve still got a little time.

The stay like that for a long while, until Lincoln comes back and May quickly excuses herself, leaving Daisy with only a brief squeeze of her hand and no promise of when she’ll come by again.

She goes back to the room that has only ever been hers and locks that door instead, picking up her tablet where she’s been doing work of her own when she has the stomach for it and opening the locked files. In Daisy’s folder, she opens a new document and begins to type.

Before she turns out her light that night, she pulls the List out of her bedside drawer, looking at the few spaces where Skye’s past is still waiting on her future. There are only a handful of visits left now, a fact that is nonetheless comforting, reminding May that there is still time to do right by the girl whose life she’s been colliding with for years, still time to leave a positive impact and not just a crater.

She’s not sure when she falls asleep, but when she wakes up, it’s to the sound of an explosion.

Instinct sends her scrambling to her feet as soon as she hears the sound, her first gulp of humid air and the scrape of concrete against her skin immediately telling her that she’s changed time and place. The room around her is dark, but moonlight slanting through lights up a strange assortment of old furniture, the kind that feels like it’s holding years in its panels as she throws open a cabinet, grabbing the first clothing item she finds—a long, musty coat—and yanking it around herself.

The home seems barely more than a single large room and the front door stands ajar. May rushes through it to a find herself in a small walled courtyard, an ancient tractor and a tied-up cow its only occupants, lit up gold by something on the other side of the house, something rapidly spreading across the roof of the home she’s just exited and causing the animal to bellow in panic.

Fire.
Melinda races for the courtyard gate on bare feet and finds it too already standing open. On the dirt street beyond it, people are running in all directions, too chaotic to be combat, shouting about the fire, shouting at one another to run, to hide, and it takes May a moment to process that she’s hearing only Chinese…and distant gunfire…

“Mei Qiaolian!” a shout cuts through the chaos, pulling her attention to the person running towards her from the direction of the fire…

“Jiejie?” Melinda calls breathlessly as her older self races up, seizing Melinda by the sleeve and hauling her away from the fire, joining the chaos of people running every direction.

“Hurry!” the woman shouts over the noise, coughing as they run. “She already saw me! We need to get out of sight!”

“Where are we?” Melinda shouts back at her counterpart, glimpsing through the intermittent flashes of light that her older self is wearing only a long shirt, that her legs are covered with blistering burns, that most of her hair is burned away, that she’s carrying a blanket-wrapped bundle in her arms…

“Hunan province,” Jiejie answers in a rush, coughing again.

It’s only then that something inside the bundle begins screaming.

*Oh my god…*

Jiejie suddenly pulls Melinda up short against a wall as they reach the edge of the houses, pointing to the dirt road that runs between the village and some flooded fields out into the night.

“There. Just keep going in that direction and you’ll run into SHIELD eventually—Agent Xu is with a vehicle not far from here.” Jiejie thrusts the bundle at Melinda, who opens her arms for it automatically, a wet blanket that’s apparently holding…

Jiejie parts the blanket, and May can’t breathe.

*Daisy.*

She looks barely a year old.

“You have to go now, Meimei,” her older self is gasping around her coughs as she strips the sodden blanket off the tiny child and re-bundles it in her arms while Daisy clings to May, still crying. “You remember what Agent Xu looks like—remember from Skye’s file? He’ll get her away from this…”

The baby in her arms is screaming louder now, and Melinda moves the child up to her shoulder, looking at her older self frantically.

“Where are you going?” she demands, and Jiejie faces her again.

“She saw me,” Jiejie gasps around another cough. “She thinks I have Daisy, so she should chase me, not you, if you stay out of sight. I’m going to buy you some time to get Daisy to safety.”

“From who?” Melinda says breathlessly, suddenly realizing what’s happening.

“You know who,” Jiejie whispers before she leans in and presses a kiss to Daisy’s head. As this unrecognizable version of herself pulls away, she meets Melinda’s eyes and brushes her fingertips briefly over her cheek.

“Bye, Meimei,” she whispers solemnly.
Gunfire suddenly rings out again, far closer than before, and the other woman quickly spins Melinda around and gives her a shove. “Run!”

Jiejie turns and races back into the village, not looking back.

Melinda raises the baby to her shoulder. “Jie!”

Something suddenly flies flashing towards her in the firelight, and Jiejie abruptly collapses, clutching her side. Horrified, Melinda nearly races to her, but then a woman appears, marching up to Jiejie where she squirms on the ground.

Jiaying.

Against her chest, Daisy lets out a fresh wail.

Finally, Melinda turns and runs.

It’s manageable enough to focus only on running as she sprints away from the bedlam behind her, focus on keeping Daisy tight against her chest so that she’s not jostled too much, focus on her breathing and keeping the path, lit only by moonlight, as it curves around the fields and puts distance between her and the horror behind them. Eventually, Melinda has to slow to a jog, then pause for breath, finally attempting to comfort the sobbing child in her arms.

“It’s all right,” she gasps, bouncing the baby slightly against her chest and smoothing a hand up her back. “It’s all right Daisy, it’s all right…”

The words don't seem to help, and May switches to Chinese, repeating the phrase again and again until Daisy’s cries begin to taper off, also interspersed with coughs.

And suddenly, in the distance, she hears the call tone of a walkie-talkie.

“Avery, what’s your ETA? Over!” a male voice barks in American English, and Melinda looks up the road, spotting the shape of a 4x4 in the darkness and immediately moving towards it.

“Still two miles out,” a woman’s voice responds from his device as she approaches. “Agent Xu, status, over?”

“Agents Zhai and Gao are not responding,” the man says breathlessly. She can now see that he’s facing the village, not exactly behind her since the road bent a little, with a pair of binoculars raised to his eyes. “I don’t know what’s happening, but there’s gunfire, and I don’t know whose or why… over!”

Daisy suddenly lets out a fresh wail in Melinda’s arms, and the agent spins towards them, his flashlight immediately held aloft, presumably alongside a gun.

“You’re looking for the 084,” Melinda calls quickly, squinting into the light not slowing her approach. “I have it.”

“Who are you?” the agent calls from the other side of the blinding light. “How do you know English?”

“I’m a SHIELD agent too,” she says, stopping just a few feet from him. “This is the 084 they’re after.”

She turns Daisy around to show him, and the baby immediately begins fussing again.
“You need to get her as far from here as possible,” May says, forcing herself to put the baby in his arms. “Just get in the car and drive and tell your team where to—“

A jet suddenly uncloaks in the air above them, lighting up the night with gunfire, striking bullets running up the road towards them. Melinda seizes the agent by his jacket and hauls him behind the car with Daisy sandwiched between them, protecting her the only way she can now…

She feels something rip through her arm, but by the time she cries out, she’s suddenly back in her bedroom at the Playground, crashing onto her mattress and strangling the scream in her throat, clutching her bleeding arm and holding on tight.

April 7, 2016

Daisy:

There are so many things wrong right now—but besides her vision and May’s admission about what’s coming, her supposed-to-be-dead backstabbing former teammate is apparently walking around with Malick and leaving mangled skeletons behind. Jemma is convinced that Ward’s body was possessed by the monster on the Maveth planet, but at the moment they have no idea what it wants or intends.

When a huge chemical company wakes up and starts moving tons of resources suddenly, Coulson announces that their team will be heading there. She and Lincoln have a separate mission however, heading for the badlands of South Dakota to see a potential Inhuman who may have a little more info on the monster.

James turns out to be grossly unhelpful, though he is baited well enough by the terragin crystal that Lincoln had brought along and hands over the artifact he stole from Afterlife without a fight at that point. As she and Lincoln make a quick escape, James shouts after them, accusations that Lincoln doesn’t deserve his powers, that he might actually kill someone now, that men like him don’t change!

So Daisy feels perfectly justified in giving Lincoln an earful as soon as they’re back on the quinjet.

“You should never have taken that crystal out of the evidence lockup!” she snaps, throwing her bag down on a seat as the ramp closes. “What the hell was all that?”

“I know James,” Lincoln says, not sounding sorry. “I knew it would work, and look—we got what we came for…”

“And what was all that about your last girlfriend?” Daisy continues after directing their flight team to get the jet airborne. “I need the truth, Lincoln, or whatever we are ends now”

So he tells her. About his poor coping methods when he was feeling the loss of his family, about the girlfriend who thought she could help him be a better person, about the drunk driving crash that nearly ended both of their lives.

“But then Gordon showed up, said he’d been watching me,” Lincoln says, tying the story onto the part Daisy already knows. “They saved her and me, brought me to Afterlife. And for the first time, I thought that emptiness I’d been feeling my whole life might be filled one day.”

She holds his hand and tries to process it all while fighting against the memory that she is one of the reasons that former home of his is now a pile of ashes…
“I want you to know that I would never hurt you,” Lincoln says quietly, gripping her hand tighter. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you sooner. I don’t want any more secrets.”

She feels the ball bounce back into her court, the invitation to level with him and tell him all the mess in her past too, but instead, the looks in the other direction.

“Then there’s something I need to tell you, too. Before Charles died, I got another glimpse into the future…and I don’t know when, but someone on our team is going to die.”

They’re still airborne half an hour later when May’s voice abruptly crackles over the radio.

“Daisy, come in! Giyera’s taken control of the plane! We need—“ She’s cut off by the sound of something hard impacting flesh, and the radio goes quiet.

“May?” Daisy shouts, lunging for her headset. “May?” But there's no response.

*This can’t be it, this can’t be it, this can’t be it…*she tells herself as she rounds on Lincoln, horrified.

“Everyone from our team is on that plane!”

“No one,” he reminds her with a pointed look.

And Daisy realizes that if May can’t die today, its going to be because they did something to make sure she doesn’t.

Daisy spins towards the cockpit.

“Re-route to Colombia!”

Chapter End Notes

*runs and hides*
Compromise

Chapter Summary

Here comes Hive...

Chapter Notes

May-centric chapter again. Goal was to get this up before the s5 finale tonight, and look, I did it!

Please enjoy? :/

See the end of the chapter for more notes

April 8, 2016—May is 46, Daisy is 27

There is shouting and gunfire when she is able to hear again.

She’s vaguely aware of a strong hand compressing her wound, but right now May can only focus on trying to stay in the present. She’d woken up to Mack lifting her in his arms, the stab of pain in her side showing her exactly where the glass had gone in when the Zephyr made its graceless landing. Somehow, she hadn’t traveled then. But then Giyera had knocked her out with something propelled by his telekinetic abilities, and now her clothes are gone, so she can only assume what happened in between.

Mack is carrying her inside a blanket through the lower level of the plane, followed closely by Coulson, who is shouting instructions to everyone and firing back at the Hydra soldiers racing in behind them. Before she knows it, they’re all crowded into a storage closet, and Mack is setting her on the floor as far from the door as possible, surrendering her to Simmons’ care.

“Help me keep pressure on it!” the doctor orders as she helps May shift onto her side and layers their hands together on the blanket over the gash in her abdomen. “Fitz, did you grab—“

“Here!” his voice carries over, followed shortly by a pile of clothes landing near them.

Mack, Coulson, and Fitz work to secure the door and slow down the soldiers outside while Simmons helps May back into the bare minimum of her clothes.

“I got a distress call out to Daisy before I disappeared,” May gasps around the pain as Simmons refastens her jeans for her. “But it could be hours…”

“We’ll hold them off until then,” the scientist assures her unconvincingly. “But we can’t have you bleeding out before that…”

“No, not today…” May mutters under her breath, but thankfully Simmons doesn’t seem to hear.

Only a few minutes later, the sounds of the tactical team battering against their door suddenly change
into the sounds of people being beaten soundly. Very quickly, all is quiet, and then someone knocks politely on the door.

“Hello?” an accented female voice calls from the other side.

Mack opens the door to reveal the Colombian girl from Daisy’s last Inhuman Response mission, looking very proud of herself and especially excited to see Mack. Daisy is right behind her, looking relieved at the sight of all of them and also very self-satisfied.

“We got Malick!” she announces with a grin. “Now can anyone fly this plane?”

May starts to heave herself to her feet, but Simmons immediately attempts to haul her back down.

“May, you can’t even walk!” she cries.

They don’t have time for this, so May just shakes her off. “I can still fly.”

Coulson helps her to the pilot’s seat, and she gets them in the air as soon as the plane is secured. On the way back to base, Lincoln tries to get her to put the Zephyr on autopilot so that he can at least bandage her up, but May snaps at him harshly enough that he only attempts this once.

Wisely enough, he and Simmons send in Daisy the next time.

“You don’t have to be such a toddler about this,” Daisy grumbles as she kneels next to May’s seat and lifts the hem of her shirt to coat the gash with stinging antiseptic and clotting solution. “He’s just trying to help.”

“I don’t want his help,” May says with a grimace as Daisy smooths a large sheet of gauze over the wound and begins taping it to her skin.

“Did you time-travel?” Daisy asks in a voice barely louder than a whisper, and May glances around at the empty cockpit once before nodding.

“When Giyera knocked me out.”

“Shit,” Daisy whispers. “He could tell Hive.”

“And what would he care?” May grumbles.

“If he thinks you’re an Inhuman, quite a bit.”

The thought is sobering, causing May to think back to what happened in Puerto Rico over a year ago. “I’m not Inhuman, though. Simmons said my DNA didn’t show any change after my encounter with the crystals—“

“Yeah, but that may have only been because you didn’t finish terragenesis,” Daisy reminds her. “You time-traveled out of your husk before anything could happen.”

“Lucky me,” May grumbles, because she’s not sure what else to say. Daisy is quiet for a moment before climbing to her feet.

“I’m glad you’re okay,” the girl whispers, brushing her hand once over May’s shoulder before leaving to debrief Coulson on the Secret Warriors’ first mission.

Once the Zephyr is docked again in the Playground, Coulson and Simmons mutually order May to the medical wing so that someone can put proper stitches in her side. A general anesthetic helps her
finally relax enough that she drifts off to sleep for a couple of hours, but she hates feeling that she’s missed something important when she wakes up in a hospital gown and bed and learns that the base is on lockdown.

Outside the glass partition, Daisy is talking to Lincoln, looking upset about something. He’s obviously trying to console her, and May watches him kiss her forehead before they both seem to notice that she’s awake. Daisy looks away immediately, but Lincoln moves in her direction.

“It’s been awhile—let me top up your pain meds,” he says as he approaches her bedside.

“I don’t want that,” May says immediately as he fills a syringe.

“In about an hour you will,” he responds, undeterred, reaching for the IV port in the back of her hand. She’s still faster though and swats his hand away.

“Those knock me out,” she says with a steady glare.

“May, come on,” Daisy says tiredly from the doorway. “He’s just trying to help you.”

Three is definitely a crowd in this case, and May looks away from them both, letting Daisy take the hint.

“Just give me a minute with her?” she hears the girl say. In her periphery, she sees Lincoln set down the syringe. “Meet me in my room later?”

May waits until they’re alone before she looks up again.

“You’re a masochist, you know that?” Daisy says, eyeing her knowingly. “No one’s going to think you’re weak for taking the edge off a lot of pain.”

“I’ll survive,” May responds drily, but those words make Daisy’s expression turn suddenly sad as she shifts closer, perching on the edge of the hospital bed.

“I was terrified we were going to lose you today.”

May can’t bear the pain in Daisy’s gaze, so she looks down at the needle in the back of her hand. “No. I promised, Daisy,” she reminds her. “You’ll know when it’s time.”

There’s a beat of silence where she sees Daisy’s hand drift towards hers, then pull back self-consciously. May looks up and meets her halfway.

“You did good today,” she says, meeting the girl’s eyes. “You led your team well.”

*Without me there.*

Daisy looks away, shaking her head. “Does it ever get any easier?”

“Only harder.”

Now Daisy’s hand does touch hers, fingertips sliding lightly along her skin, clasping gently around the IV. May allows it for a moment, but then she carefully pulls her hand away.

“Lincoln’s waiting for you,” she says, unable to meet Daisy’s eyes as she says it.

For a moment, Daisy doesn’t move, but there’s an attitude in her movements when she finally gets to her feet.
“Stop punishing him when you're the one telling me to move on.”

The following silence stings May’s ears after Daisy leaves.

It doesn’t take things long to go from bad to worse. Even sneaking out of the medical wing any finally getting filled in on the base lockdown doesn’t make any difference. Someone, most likely the swayed Inhuman, has killed Malick and set off a grenade in the interrogation room, hiding the cause of death. Simmons makes a horrifying discovery shedding a little light on the nature of Hive’s infection, but any attempt to confine the team’s four Inhumans blows up in their faces.

In the end, it’s Daisy who tricks them all into confinement, and Lincoln is outed as the culprit when the Inhuman artifact is found in his locker. The four are all put in separate bays until the science team can verify that the other three are all uninfected, and Coulson finally makes May sit down again once night has fallen over the base and there’s nothing left to wonder about.

“You shouldn’t have gotten out of bed,” he mutters, passing her a glass of something that smells strong.

“You needed backup,” she responds, knocking the drink back. Lincoln was right—she’s wishing for some pain meds now, but this will do. She holds out the glass to Coulson for a refill, which he obliges without even a warning look.

“We’ll get Lincoln some help,” he says, holding his own glass without drinking it, “and once we know that the other three are fine, they can help us follow up with Hive. You need to take care of yourself, though.”

“I’ll be okay,” she reminds him with a pointed look. “One of the few perks of seeing the future.”

Before she’s finished her second glass though, a quake shudders through the base. She waits for the shaking to stop, waits for Daisy to cut it off, but it only intensifies, rattling dishes off the shelves and items off the walls, making the ceiling above them groan…

And as she races after Coulson while pieces of the ceiling crash down around them, May realizes that this, unfortunately, was something she never saw coming.

April 10, 2016

It takes two days to clear the base of rubble.

Everyone is as shaken by the revelation that Daisy was infected as they were by the quake itself, but it seems obvious to May that things could certainly have been far worse. Though Coulson has a fractured tibia and there are plenty of other injuries to go around, they’re not digging any graves. Daisy had busted the hydraulics on the hangar doors, probably to keep anyone from immediately following, but by the second day, Mack’s team has managed to pry them open halfway, and no one fights May when she gets in the pilot’s seat this time.

“Daisy’s still one of us,” she hears Coulson briefing the assembled agents as she tips the Zephyr on a nauseating axis to squeeze it through the doors above them. “What she did here was not of her own free will. Hive infected her—she’s his hostage. We need to remember that. But this alien creature messed with the wrong team. It doesn’t know how stubborn we are, especially when it comes to protecting our own.”

No, it fucking doesn’t, May thinks as the plane finally breaks out into the blue.
They can only assume that the monster’s current priority is gathering Inhumans to sway into its army, and Alisha Whitley seems like a likely first stop, since she’s one Daisy knew personally.

Lincoln knew her first though and insists that he’s the one who should approach her on SHIELD’s behalf. He’s beating himself up as much as anyone else for not noticing Daisy’s infection before it was too late, and May might use this as an excuse to be more sour towards him if she didn’t feel so guilty about it herself.

*Daisy was right there talking to you twice Melinda, and you didn’t notice anything wrong, either. Don’t blame the kid who barely knows her for missing it too.*

As they gather gear in the cargo level before landing in Alisha’s city, Coulson lays out a vest for Lincoln and hands a small device to May.

“What is this?” they both ask, and Coulson looks grim as he explains.

“It’s rigged with C4. So if Hive gets his hands on him—“

“I go kaboom?” Lincoln says disbelievingly. “Oh, that would make you both real happy wouldn’t it? You get Daisy back and the three of you can live as one little messed up family again?”

Startled by the accusation but more stunned by Coulson’s request, May throws down the device on top of the vest.

“Absolutely not.”

“It’s a last resort,” Coulson insists.

“It’s insane!” Lincoln snaps, looking furious.

“Look, I want your help,” Coulson says, facing him and sounding sincere. “I need it. But you get swayed by Hive, that’s it. No one’s going to force you to do anything you don’t want to do—that’s the whole point. But if you want in the field, then this is a risk you’ve got to be willing to take.”

He picks up the device and holds it out to May again. She only glares at him and walks away, refusing to touch it one more time.

Alisha has been in a safehouse ever since her run-in with Lash last year, but her guards have been minimal, and currently, none of them are answering Coulson’s calls.

“Lincoln?” Coulson says over comms as their SUV rolls up in front of the condo.

“I’m in position by Alisha’s car” he responds in their ears, voice echoing with the sound of a cavernous garage.

“Good. May, you take the stairs, I’ll stay with the car a level below and come up as if needed.”

May has already opened her car door when Coulson gives her one more order.

“Tell me we’re going to get her back,” he says quietly, and she turns around to find him looking directly at her.

Her brow furrows as she pulls the door halfway closed again. “What?”

Coulson reaches up and turns off his comm, and she automatically does the same.
“You said you’ve seen the future, at least past this,” he says, reminding her of their last conversation before Daisy disappeared. “Was Daisy there? Was she okay?”

May’s chest feels tight as she remembers hearing Daisy’s voice over the phone, four years away from today, and as she thinks of everything else she saw and learned in her mother’s home on that visit, she realizes just how much Coulson doesn’t yet know is still ahead of them.

She can’t look at him as she answers.

“She was alive. And I think she was okay.” She opens the door again. “But I don’t know much about what’s between then and now.”

“May—“

“I need to get into position,” she mutters, switching her comm back on as she climbs out of the car and hurries towards the stairwell.

The confrontation with Alisha doesn’t end well. Only a minute or so into Lincoln’s conversation with her, it becomes clear that Hive has beat them to her, and a fight begins. May rushes up the stairs and manages to make it a little more of a fair fight, since Lincoln is fighting two versions of the redhead, but at some point, one of the women lands a blow to May’s side close enough to her stitches that she screams in pain. Almost as soon as the sound leaves her mouth, however, she’s somewhere else.

She teeters, disoriented, on the carpet for a moment, immediately recognizing the space around her but unsure, at first, of the date. Pressing a hand against her side where blood is now flowing freely from the place her stitches used to be, she hurries to the bed and crouches, fishing beneath it for the first aid kit that she’d kept there when she and Skye once shared this space. It’s right where it should be, and as Melinda tears open a packet of gauze with her teeth and piles it over her wound, she suddenly realizes what visit this must be.

She’s curled on the bed beneath a throw blanket when Meimei walks in a few moments later, coming in and quickly shutting the door behind her as soon as she processes Melinda’s presence and the open first aid kit beside her.

“What’s wrong?” she asks immediately, quickly crossing to her side and lifting the blanket.

“Abdominal laceration. No vital organs,” Melinda explains, briefly lifting the gauze for her to see. “Just left my stitches with my clothes.”

“Jesus,” her younger self mutters, pulling the kit closer to herself. “Do you want me to—“

“I won’t be here long,” Melinda cuts her off, tucking the blanket back over her bare body. “You can put it away.”

“How’d you get it?” Meimei asks as she closes the white box back up and slides it back beneath the bed.

“You don’t need to know,” Melinda answers, closing her eyes tiredly, the adrenaline of the fight finally receding. “Probably wouldn’t believe it anyway.”

“I’ve seen some strange things,” her younger self says, joining her on the bed again, and Melinda huffs a soft, painful laugh.

“Not yet, you haven’t,” she says, just as she hears the sound of the door opening again.
Skye still has long hair and bangs that May knows her younger self had just cut into the girl’s hair herself. She looks like a different person.

She looks like a different era.

“What’s wrong?” Skye asks, just like Meimei, crossing quickly to the bed.

_No parents. No powers. No breakup. No loss…_

“It’s okay, she’s got it,” Meimei says, stopping Skye’s attempt to touch Melinda.

“Nothing to worry about, D—Skye,” she says, exhaling the pain as she remembers all over again what used to be theirs. “Just another day.”

“Do you want me to get you—“ Skye starts to say, but Melinda waves off her words.

“It’s okay, I won’t be here too much longer. Come sit with us.”

_Let me hear your voice…_

Skye obeys without hesitation, kicking off her shoes and climbing up on the bed with the two of them.

“What’s the date?” Melinda asks, even though she knows.

“September 2, 2014,” Skye answers without checking her phone.

“Our birthday,” Melinda says a smile as her eyes fall shut. Blindly, she reaches out a hand from inside the blanket and brushes Meimei’s knee. “Good times, aren’t they?”

_Savor them._

_Don’t take them for granted._

_Don’t leave her until you have to…_

“When are you here from?” Skye asks nervously above her, and May opens her eyes as she reaches over and catches Skye’s hand in hers.

“It’s good to see you, Skye,” she whispers with a wistful smile. She brings the girl’s hand up to her face and lays Skye’s palm over her cheek, needing to feel it, needing to remember this…

The last thing she hears is Skye whispering her name. Then suddenly, she’s back on the cold concrete of a parking garage, Phil’s jacket landing over her body and two redheads dead on the ground around her.

She doesn’t say much on the ride back to the Zephyr, letting Coulson field Lincoln’s confused questions and accusations on her behalf.

“All this time, you too, and you didn’t think this was something the rest of the team should know about?” the young man says after Coulson lays out a bare-bones explanation for what Lincoln just saw.

“It’s always been a need-to-know situation,” Coulson says calmly as he steers the car through the suburban streets towards the airport where they left the Zephyr. “And May’s not an Inhuman, so
there was no reason to worry about her encountering Hive.”

“Disappearing out of your clothes and apparently changing years seems pretty inhuman to me!” the younger man snaps from the front seat, looking back at May where she is stretched out over one of the backseats keeping pressure on her side wound, her shoes and his explosive vest discarded on the floor beside her.

“It doesn’t have anything to do with crystals,” Coulson says for her, keeping his eyes on the road. “This started a long time ago for her.”

“Inhuman or not, Alisha saw her disappear before she died. The original Alisha is obviously with Hive, and she could tell him everything. If he thinks you’re Inhuman…”

“Then he’ll surely ask Daisy, who will insist that she’s not,” Coulson cuts Lincoln off.

“Daisy knows too?” Now, Lincoln actually sounds horrified. “Well, then she can tell him everything, can’t she?”

*Can’t she.*

The momentary silence following those words tells her that they’re all following this idea to its potentially-horrible conclusion, and May hates that she doesn’t have anything to say in response that isn’t her pat *We’re going to make it through this somehow* reassurance.

*Daisy could tell Hive everything.*

*Everything.*

*And what if I am Inhuman, just not turned?*

There’s nothing to be done about that possibility for the moment, though, so May stays quiet for the rest of the drive, focusing only on breathing through the pain. When they finally make it back to the Zephyr, she allows Lincoln stitch her up again.

“I wouldn’t have told anyone,” he mutters as he works on her in one of the rooms of the Zephyr designated for medical use. “You could have trusted me.”

“The fewer people knew, the better,” she says, even though she doesn’t owe him an explanation. “And like Coulson said, I’m not Inhuman.”

“Are you positive?” he says, and she feels the distant tug of her skin being pulled back together on the other side of the anesthetic. “Did getting your powers have anything to do with an Inhuman encounter?”

Startled by the accuracy of his guess, May at first says nothing, which seems to answer the question for him.

“Plenty of modern Inhumans have been interested in the biochemical science of Inhuman transformation,” Lincoln says then, “so a lot of data has been collected from everyone who’s passed through Afterlife in the past century. Terragenesis is its own beast, but there have been a few accounts of some people gaining enhanced abilities through encounters with other Inhumans. But their abilities have tended to be more…volatile.”

“Sounds about right,” May exhales, relaxing slightly when she hears him setting aside his suturing instruments. “Any studies done on how to make their abilities go away?”
“Not that I’m aware of,” he says, smoothing a bandage carefully over her wound and taping it to her skin. “Although one trend we saw was that in the people who experienced changes like yours, almost all of them carried the genetic marker for Inhuman descent, just hadn’t been transformed.”

The fact is chilling, and May remains stiff on the table even after he pulls her shirt down and steps away to pack away his tools and dispose of the biohazards.

“So I could be,” she says slowly, desperately hoping she misunderstood him. “Inhuman.”

“Only one way to know for sure,” Lincoln says with a shrug in his voice. “But the price is high if you’re wrong.”

She finally sits up slowly on the table, her mind racing.

_Is this it? Is this the missing piece?_

_Maybe Katya was able to jolt you with her powers because the seed was already there._

_You might have transformed just like Daisy if you’d stuck around in that cocoon long enough._

_Maybe Jiaying was able to short-circuit it because her powers rob others of what they have._

_If Hive thinks you’d be an asset if turned, he might have Daisy come after you with one of the crystals that she stole…_

But just after that, their team gets reports of irregular seismic activity in Wyoming, and when they get to the potential Inhuman’s house, they see that that’s exactly what Hive had in mind, just not for her, and fortunately or unfortunately, they’re entirely too late.

_April 11, 2016_

A few hours after James’s house explodes with her and Coulson under it, they’re back at the Playground. Dawn is still holding out on the horizon when she finds her friend up in his office, watching the monitor on his wall.

“This has been going on this week, too,” he explains as she tries to understand what she’s seeing on the screens. “I had Talbot working on all Malick’s Hydra intel—the man gave us everything. You mess with his family, all bets are off. I don’t think aliens get that.”

“So this is…” She looks at the world map, the multiple feeds of teams in position, about to cut off the heads of their enemies.

“We’re about to take down Hydra’s infrastructure,” he confirms. “Want to watch?”

She does. They do. Minutes, tick by as they sit together on the edge of his desk and watch ATCU soldiers finish what SHIELD once started. Explosions, gunfire, collapsing buildings, a head cut off.

“Just like that…” May murmurs when it’s all over.

“Just like that,” Coulson says, killing the feed. “This should have been a great day.”

They sit in silence for over a minute, both absorbing what just happened, both trying to decide what to do next.
“You promise we’re going to get her back?” he eventually asks quietly, his tone begging for any reassurance she can offer, and May thinks again of that future visit that is her only reassurance so far that this is true.

*Daisy was only a voice on the phone, but she looked herself in those pictures on the fridge, looked whole and unharmed…*

“I promise,” she says quietly, coming to the rest of the decision as she says it.

*He needs to know the rest.*

She finally moves first, but it’s not to the door. Instead, she goes behind his desk opens the cabinet where she spotted it a few months back. She finds two tumblers on the shelf and brings them too, returning to the desk and handing one to her friend.

“Phil…” she says, setting the second glass on the desk, “there’s something I need to tell you.”

She opens the bottle of Haig.

He listens.

She tells him everything—everything she knows so far and how she knows it. She can’t bear to look at him as she talks, can’t bear to watch the way the truth fissures through him with shock and horror. But he listens, waits until she’s done, and only then does he look away, pushing a hand through what remains of his hair, and exhaling disbelievingly.

“God, Mel.”

He hasn’t even sipped his glass, and how he sets it aside, his hands slowly folding together across his thighs.

“You’ve been sitting on this for weeks?”

“Just a couple,” she admits.

"When you're telling me you've got less than a month left..."

She bites her lip and nods, finally taking a drink from her glass.

“And you’re sure it was…Jiaying?”

She looks away, pursing her lips grimly. “I didn’t stay to see what happened between her and my older self, but yes, I’m sure it was Jiaying that I saw.”

“She and Cal must have been looking for Daisy…” he thinks aloud. “Cal said that he was trying to put his family back together…”

“But I think Hydra was there too,” she reminds him. “There was gunfire, and at least one jet, and I’m sure they didn’t belong to Daisy’s parents…”

He exhales slowly, still absorbing everything, and she thinks back to the conversation they had with the lapsed agent on their Bus all those years ago, back when all they knew about Skye’s history was that she was an 0-8-4 that had been hunted across the world by someone leaving a trail of bodies behind her…

“What if the death that’s following her has really been looking for me?” May had thought fearfully
at that time.

She was wrong. But she was also right.

“Promise me you won’t tell Daisy,” she says quietly. “After we get her back, after I’m gone, promise me you won’t tell her what I’ve just told you. She’d kill herself with the guilt.”

Perhaps not literally, but May knows too well there are so many other ways a person can make herself suffer for years.

He’s quiet for a long moment, and she stares hard at him, needing to hear him say it.

“Phil.”

“I promise,” he says then, bowing his head and dragging a hand over his eyes before looking up at her again. “Why are you telling me, though?”

The pain in his gaze nearly makes her run, but she stays and tells the truth.

“Because I saw what you did after Rosalind died. And you’d loved her only for a little while.”

He looks away, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he swallows hard, and she reaches over to touch his good hand gently.

“I don’t want you to go off on some path of revenge because you need to make someone pay for what’s been done. This already happened. A long time ago. Daisy’s with us today because that’s what happens.”

Beneath her hand, his fingers move, pulling her fingers barely between his, holding on without holding her hand.

“This is so unfair,” he whispers.

Whether he’s talking about her, Daisy, or himself, in every way, Melinda knows that this is true.

“I’m sorry to give you this burden to carry,” she says softly, feeling the deferred tears filling her eyes. “But Phil, I think it is fair, at least for me. This is all started because I took a little girl and her mother’s lives. Then I took Skye’s mother from her. So saving her…it’s like breaking the loop and balancing the scales, even if it’s how I lose my life.”

Only then do the pieces suddenly fall into place.

“You’re not going to do this twice,” the woman had said on the deck of the ship. “You’re not taking her from me again…”

But I already did. I know that I will. And if it’s what it takes to save Daisy’s life, I’d do it all over again.

The weight of it all, past, present, and future, presses down on her so suddenly that it becomes hard to breathe, so she doesn’t fight it even a little as Coulson reaches out and puts his arm gently around her shoulders. She tries to hold herself up for only a moment longer before giving up and collapsing against him, letting out the pain in a wave that threatens to untether her completely. She can tell he’s crying too, but he remains quiet, holding onto her steadily, the most important thing he’s always been for her.

They stay like that until dawn bleeds up outside the office window, side by side, holding off the
future as long as they possibly can.

April 13, 2016

Daisy has been gone for five days now, and they’re no closer to finding her than they were on day one. Fitz and Simmons had apparently crossed paths with her in Bucharest the night before when Coulson sent them to track down the only possible scientist who might have been the only one who could have saved Daisy. Unfortunately, Hive seemed to have had the same intel (probably through Daisy still ghosting through their computer systems), and the two of them have now made the doctor disappear too.

“She choked me,” Fitz says grimly, his arms cross and gaze on the ground as he debriefed Coulson and May when they got back. “Said she was herself, that she was doing what she wanted, that we didn’t need to follow her or we would all just get hurt.”

“That doesn’t sound like her,” Coulson said quietly.

“No. That’s why I don’t buy it,” Fitz agrees. “She’s a hostage. And our only hope for getting her back is to figure out a cure.”

Almost as soon as May reaches the lower level again, Lincoln is on her heels.

“Any word on Daisy?” he asks, trotting after her.

“No,” she lies soundly.

“Tried reaching out to any old contacts?” he persists, still following.

“Yes.”

“Maybe you could—“

“We’re handling it,” she cuts him off, feeling him halt behind her.

“Look, I just want to help!” he calls after her, sounding desperate enough that she looks back. “If I’m locked in the base, at least let me do something.”

“We all about care about Daisy,” she says, dialing up her glare.

“It’s not the same!” he snaps, making her snap too.

“No,” she says, taking a half step forward and squaring up her shoulders. “The rest of us have known her a lot longer. You really want to help? Stop trying.”

That was yesterday.

So maybe it isn’t so surprising that when she woke up this morning, she saw gray hair in the mirror for the first time.

Before noon, she hears that Lincoln went behind Fitz and Simmons’s backs and injected himself with their latest attempt at a cure for Hive’s sway. Now laid up in the medical wing and barely able to walk, he won’t be going anywhere any time soon. Unfortunately for him, that’s when their facial recognition scanners eventually catch a glimpse of Daisy in an abandoned mining town in south Wyoming, a place that is now crawling with military.
“It has to be a trap,” Coulson sighs as he, Mack, and May stares at her picture on his wall. “She’s a trained spy now, and she’s been able to hack CCTV cameras since before she was old enough to drink. Besides that, she’s the one who programmed the software that she just got flagged on. She wouldn’t get caught on camera now unless she wanted to be.”

Mack is convinced that this means Daisy wants to be rescued, but May can’t let herself think it. Coulson assigns the two of them the mission, but cautions them to take only a small team.

“Priority one is assassinating Hive. If we get rid of him, we’ll get Daisy back. This is not a rescue. It’s a targeted strike.”

May hears his orders, but she knows he wouldn’t have put both her and Mack on this mission if he didn’t want to see Daisy back as soon as possible.

It’s midafternoon by the time the Zephyr with its tiny team touches down in Wyoming, cloaked but still a half-kilometer outside the city-limits. Coulson stays on the plane but is monitoring their helmet cams as they approach the town through backyards and abandoned shop alleys.

They don’t have time to search the whole town, but when May spots the guy whose home fell on top of her two days ago, she knows they must be in the right place.

It takes over an hour of working him before she gets him to say where Hive might be at the moment, and it’s been a long time since it felt that good to knock someone out.

Mack and his team are already ahead of her, but almost as soon as they get into the mining warehouse and see the spinning transmitter beaming something towards the stars, Coulson gives the order to get out—something aerial is inbound. From a distance, May can see her team get clear just before something streaks from the sky down into the building. She races for her group while two figures walk out, each carrying huge bladed weapons.

They have blue skin.

*Must be the Kree.*

They follow at a distance as the alien takes out Alisha (both of her) and a couple of Hydra agents.

“Why would Hive signal these things?” May whispers, trying to stay focused even while trying to stomach the fact that *there are aliens walking around the town now*…

“Maybe he’s trying to form some kind of alliance,” Mack guesses.

“These things are hunters, not allies,” Agent Piper mutters as the pair take out yet another set of Hydra agents.

One moves towards the church, but then a tremor ripples through the ground from the other direction, and Mack suggests they split up.

“You should go for Daisy,” he mutters to May. “She’d be more likely to listen to you.”

*But Daisy is compromised, and Hive could have given Daisy different orders for me.*

“We’re not here for Daisy,” she reminds him, even though it kills her to say it. “If we take out Hive, we’ll get Daisy back too.”

“I have to try,” he says, holstering his gun. “I’ll meet you at the extraction point.”
She leads their soldiers into the church, and as they peer through the door, she gets her first live glimpse of Grant Ward…speaking to the alien. Their confrontation eventually becomes a fight, but even over the sounds of shattering church pews, May can hear in their comms that things are not going well for Mack as he tries to talk Daisy into leaving with them.

“Take the shot!” Coulson orders in her ear when Hive suddenly turns the Kree to dust, and May and O’Brien light up the walking corpse with bullets.

He doesn’t fall.

“Agent May,” the monster says in Ward’s voice, taking a step towards her. “I was hoping you’d come.”

She doesn’t want to hear it.

“Piper!” she shouts, ducking out of the way, and the young agent leaps in with a bazooka. The missile is a direct hit, but the not-quite-man still doesn’t fall, his flesh stitching itself back together on the spot.

“We have to go! Now!” she shouts, leading her team away as fast as they can move.

They race in Mack’s direction, all hearing in their comms that the two are now fighting, and it sounds Daisy is beating Mack into the asphalt.

“Do we engage?” Piper gasps into her comms as they round the corner and see Mack and Daisy in the middle of the street ahead of them, him on the ground, her holding him down with her powers.

May knows the agent is talking to Coulson, but it doesn’t matter.

“Negative!” she shouts, stopping in her tracks and raising her pistol.

*Because if anyone else did this, I’d never forgive them.*

Her shot is exactly where she aimed, straight through Daisy’s outstretched arm. The sound the girl makes as she collapses backward goes straight to May’s heart, but she focuses only on Mack as her team races up.

“We need emergency evacuation!” O’Brien shouts to the aerial team, and May can’t help glimpsing Daisy’s wound as they fall on Mack and drag him away from her.

*Potential irreversible damage to limb, risk of exsanguination…*

But Hive is already approaching as May helps her team haul Mack into the escape pod after it plunges down on the road behind them, and May is sure that he’s not about to let his best soldier die from a flesh wound.

*This is not Daisy*, she tells herself as she looks back at the two figures once the door closes. *That’s not Ward…*

It barely helps. Everything inside her is screaming to run to Daisy’s side, to risk anything she has fighting to get Ward away from her, to die trying to save her…

*No. Not today*, she tells herself, forcing a deep breath. *She’ll be okay, somehow—you know it. We’ll find another way to get her back.*

*And you’ll die saving her all right, just not today.*
May repeats it to herself again and again as the escape pod lifts into the air and leaves Daisy behind in the darkness.

When she finally crawls into bed that night after they get back to the Playground, May barely sleeps, and it’s almost a relief when she wakes up in another place.


She throws on clothes, grabs a wad of cash, and races down to the street to hail a cab.

“St. Agnes Group Home,” May tells the driver breathlessly as she throws herself into the car and slams the door. “As fast as you can get there.”

She doesn’t want to miss a minute of any time they have left.

Chapter End Notes

Truthfully, I had every intention of all six remaining s3 eps being in this chapter, mostly because I h.a.t.e.d. the Hive arc so much and just wanted to get it all behind me.

But...you know me.

Next chapter will close out the rest of s3’s events, but cheers, it’s already almost done!
April 14-19, 2016—May is 46, Daisy is 27

They’re running out of ideas.

Mack is still laid up with a fractured clavicle, an arm fractured in three places, and eight cracked ribs. Simmons’ anti-toxin wasn’t successful, and Lincoln is still locked up downstairs with a compromised immune system, all they have to show for it. Joey is gone, but Elena is hanging around, wanting something to do. They know what Hive wants to do—turn every human into an Inhuman that can be swayed into his army—but they still aren’t sure how he plans to do it. The Avengers have been in the national spotlight again, fighting over the issue of the Sokovia Accords and the fugitive Winter Soldier, and Coulson finally reaches out to Talbot and agrees to a meeting.

“He’s in charge of the ATCU now,” he reminds them when he announces the plan to her one morning. “We’ll need as many legitimate bodies on our side as possible if Hive’s ambition is as global as it sounds.”

“And all their resources,” she says, remembering the technology that the organization had brought to the table.

“They’re going to ask if we have unregistered enhanced persons in our care,” he warns, eyes on the coverage of the international fallout surrounding the Avengers’ breakup. “And I’m planning to be open about that, but Talbot will probably have a lot to say about me sheltering an Inhuman that’s given the ATCU so much trouble so far.”

“You’re not thinking of giving up Lincoln, are you?” May asks quickly, her brow furrowing.

“I’m not planning on giving up anyone,” Coulson says, facing her. “But he actually wasn’t who I was thinking of.”

And then she remembers who is in the cell beside Lincoln’s.

“You’re talking about Lash?”

Coulson doesn’t answer at first, just pulls over his tablet and kills the news feeds on the wall, sending the room into sudden silence.

“I know we haven’t really talked about this at all since last month,” he says, facing her but not yet meeting her eyes, “but it’s occurred to me that Lash might be a resource we’re not utilizing. If every human has a purpose, like Lincoln has said, and Lash’s purpose is to destroy Inhumans, then he may be just what the doctor ordered to take down Hive.”

Poor choice of words, May grimaces, looking away.

“We all know Daisy’s been hacking our servers fairly regularly since she left,” Coulson goes on, “I
think she may come after Lincoln sooner or later on Hive’s behalf, recruit another high-powered Inhuman for their army. She’ll probably frame it as helping him escape our confinement. And that could be the chance we need to get a plane headed straight to Hive’s front door.”

May nods, following his idea to its natural conclusion and realizing what he wants.

“What do you need me to do?”

“Talk to Lincoln—covertly, so Daisy can’t overhear. Get him on board. Make a plan. Brief me when it’s ready. And the sooner the better—it’s already been a week since Hive took Daisy. She could come for him soon.”

May leaves his office wondering if there’s any possibility Daisy might come for her, too.

She is no more excited to talk to Lincoln than she ever has been, but Daisy’s likely presence in their security cameras gives her an excuse to do it in written form rather than face to face.

*We have an idea to take out Hive, and we need you on board,* the first message she sends tucked beneath his drinking glass on a breakfast tray reads.

*What’s the plan?* he scrawls back on the same piece of paper before someone picks up the tray later.

The back-and-forth continues throughout the day until he understands the part he needs to play when Daisy inevitably comes hacking into his cell. Even after that, though, the messages continue, three times a day, as they wait for Daisy to come calling.

*Are you really okay with this?* a note on the second day reads. *Risking Lash in order to rescue Daisy? I know who he used to be to you.*

*That person is gone,* May writes back, telling herself as much as she’s telling him. *I won’t pretend to know what Andrew wanted, but I’m sure that he wouldn’t want to be remembered for the worst he did. If there’s any way he can do some good as Lash, I think he would be okay with it.*

The message that returns Lincoln’s tray that evening, however, startles her.

*You still love her, don’t you?*

She leaves no return message on the next tray, but he sends another note back with it anyway.

*Daisy never told me the specifics, but it’s obvious that you guys were something pretty significant before. And I may not know why you’re not together now, but I can tell that you still love her, and it makes me feel like I should apologize for loving her too.*

She doesn’t want to hear this, but somewhere deep inside, May feels the tiniest bit *relieved.* It makes her merciful enough to tell a little bit of the truth.

*Don’t apologize. There’s going to be a time very soon where she’s going to need you even more.*

One more note comes back before show time.

*She told me she had another vision because of Charles, of someone on our team dying. She’s convinced that it was you.*

She has time to write back only one more message.

*That’s why she’s going to need you soon.*
The very next day, May watches the security feeds as Lincoln, guided by Daisy in the computers, sneaks through the base in the direction of the hangar while Coulson distracts Talbot, who is visiting their base. May gives the order through the computer for Lash’s pod to be raised onto one of the quinjets, and Lincoln gets out of the plane at the last second. The jet soars off in the direction of Wyoming, running on autopilot that Daisy must have programmed. After that, all anyone can do is wait.

They all sit around the table in Coulson’s office once Talbot is gone and they know the quinjet is nearing its destination. The camera on the jet reveals Hive waiting to greet the passenger as the ramp opens, and they glimpse his surprise at the sight of a figure that’s definitely not Lincoln. Lash immediately lunges for him, and the two monsters disappear off camera for a few minutes.

The seconds tick by agonizingly slow, and May’s heart hammers in her chest. They can’t see or hear anything, and there is one instance where the jet shudders, as if shaken by a tremor.

But then,

“Look!” Lincoln says at the same second May gasps and Coulson’s fist lands lightly on the table while he lets out his breath.

Lash is approaching the ramp of the quinjet again, carrying Daisy, limp in his arms. She has bandages around both elbows, and even from the terrible quality of the jet’s camera, May can see that her skin is horribly pale. Daisy seems half-conscious, opening her eyes as Lash lays her down on the floor of the plane…

“No!” Coulson suddenly says, inaudible to the people on the other side of the camera, and May sees what he does just after it’s too late.

A flaming chain pierces through Lash’s chest, thrown from behind by the Inhuman James. May can’t stop herself from gasping, covering her mouth in horror, shocked both by the act and the horrible pain that explodes in her chest at the sight of the person who used to be Andrew collapsing to the ground beside Daisy. The girl raises her arm and sends a pulse through the air that throws James a safe distance from the plane, then touches Lash’s hand just before the monster’s form goes completely still.

May feels Lincoln and Coulson’s eyes shift towards her, but she keeps her eyes on the screen, watching as Daisy rolls weakly away from Lash and begins a slow crawl towards the cockpit. She moves out of the camera’s vantage point, but they see the cargo ramp close.

And then, through the static…

“Ragtag base, come in.”

Daisy’s voice is weak and raspy, but May has never heard such a welcome sound. Feeling everyone still looking at her, she grabs the headset off the table and puts it over her ears.

“This is Agent Johnson,” she hears. “I’m coming home.”

May lets out a breath that it feels like she’s been holding for weeks.

“Copy that, Daisy.”

She’s holding back tears the entire time she pilots the jet remotely, bringing Daisy safely through the sky back to their underground home. She can’t say much, but Daisy is telling her everything, as if trying to make up for lost time and provide as much intel as she can. May puts Daisy on speaker as
the girl describes the pathogen Radcliffe has created that turns any person into a swayed Inhuman, a
deformed monster to do Hive’s bidding. She tells them how she’s given far more blood than is safe
because they needed the Kree substance that’s still in her veins, and Coulson immediately calls down
to medical to prepare a transfusion of Daisy’s blood type.

“I’m sorry,” Daisy keeps gasping into the microphone. “Coulson, I’m sorry. May, I’m sorry.
Lincoln…”

“You’re almost here, Daisy,” May whispers, giving the order for the hangar doors to open. “Hold
on.”

Coulson holds out a pair of handcuffs to May. She takes them, thinking of how he’d once tried to
hand her a detonator, and hurries down to the hangar.

The first thing she sees when the quinjet’s ramp opens is Lash’s body, cold and still across the belly
of the plane. May isn’t ready for the jolt that goes through her at the sight, but she makes herself
move, stepping over the enormous form and hurrying up the ramp to the place where Daisy is trying
shakily to get to her feet.

“May,” she says in a quivering voice as their eyes meet. May reads her body language and
immediately rushes forward, catching Daisy in her arms as the girl’s legs give out. Two armed agents
are waiting at the base of the ramp, and May hears them shift forward as she and Daisy collapse to
the jet’s floor, but May orders them to stand down, to wait, holds the shaking girl in her arms as
Daisy shudders against her. Beneath the sleeve of her t-shirt, a bandage covers the place where May
knows she herself put a bullet, a sight that both makes her want to hold Daisy tighter and back away
in shame. She makes herself stay put though, makes herself speak and cut off Daisy’s trembling
apologies…


“May, I’m sorry. Andrew…”

“I know. Take a deep breath.”

She waits until Daisy calms a little before pulling back and cradling the girl’s face with one hand.

“We’re going to get you a blood transfusion first. Medical is going to make sure you get everything
you need to get better and make sure you’re not swayed anymore. But first, I’m going to put
handcuffs on you.”

Daisy’s broken gaze meets hers, but then the girl looks away and holds up her arms.

“Good.”

As May clicks the cuffs on as gently as possible, a memory surfaces of a lifetime ago, back when
Coulson had once thought she was a traitor, when he had left Skye in the cockpit to cuff her when
she returned from her time travel.

He was wrong then.

Is he wrong now?

She stands first and shrugs out of her jacket, draping it around Daisy’s shoulders before helping the
girl to her feet.
“These agents will walk you in,” she says, assisting Daisy down the ramp until her feet are again on the fissured concrete of the base she had nearly quaked apart the last time she was here. “Coulson is waiting inside.”

“May,” Daisy says quietly, looking beseechingly back at her.

She’s not sure if Daisy is trying to apologize or ask her not to leave her, but May shakes her head either way. She makes herself turn away, makes herself walk back up the ramp to Andrew’s side, waits until she hears the base’s door open before she looks back at Daisy before she disappears inside. She stares down at Lash’s body for a moment before slowly kneeling at his shoulder, breathing through the reality that Andrew is, really and truly gone.

*Every bad thing in your life in the past few years could have been avoided if you’d never met me,* she had said in their last conversation.

*I don’t have any regrets about that,* he’d said generously. *I wouldn't have changed a thing.*

Generous. The virtue that had been his to a fault. She’d wondered before if that would be what got him in trouble someday.

She stares at the monster that doesn’t look a thing like Andrew and wonders if maybe, just maybe, she was right.

Coulson suggests that everyone give Daisy a couple of days to recover before visiting, with the exception of Simmons going in to question her about everything that’s happened. May’s heart breaks for Daisy, but she’s glad to have the excuse to keep her distance for now and deal with one tragedy at a time. When Coulson asks her what she wants to do with Andrew’s body, she doesn’t know what to do except have him cremated. He has no living family to contact, and it seems simplest to just send a message to Culver about his passing and let them tell anyone else who cared. She asks for a funeral home to inter his ashes.

She wasn’t expecting to coordinate his funeral before her own.

She wasn’t expecting any of these things to hurt quite this much.

**April 21, 2016**

Looking back, May will agree that bringing Hive back to their base, even suspended in an ATCU-issue gel matrix, was not one of their team’s most inspired decisions. The real Trojan horse, however, had apparently already been delivered to their base, though. A disguised delivery of the very pathogen they had just stopped Hive from dispersing via warhead, one that turns several of their agents into the so-called “Primitives” in minutes and sends them scrambling through the base, running from their own.

She, Coulson, Elena, and Lincoln are watching from Coulson’s office as the Primitives in the hangar break Hive free from his matrix. The monster who looks like Ward sends the handful of Primitives in one direction while he moves up the ramp of her plane.

“You think he’d use the Zephyr’s weapons system to make a way into the base?” Coulson says, sounding sick.

Mack suddenly rushes in. “Daisy said she told Hive everything the Zephyr’s capable of. If he gets his pathogen onto the plane and gets it high enough into the atmosphere—”
“Then he doesn’t need a warhead,” May finishes, horrified.

“We need someone to get in there—“

“I can go!” Elena immediately volunteers. “The gas won’t change me.”

“No, but it can sway you,” Coulson says, dismissing the offer. “I won’t let what happened to Daisy happen to anyone else.

“Wait,” Mack says, drawing their attention back to the screen displaying the camera trained at the cargo ramp of the Zephyr. “There’s a pod in there now.”

They seem to all realize whose it must be only seconds before Hive goes flying out of the plane, Daisy running after him, nearly foaming at the mouth.

“All right,” Coulson orders, sounding horribly calm considering the circumstances. “Fitz, May, go check Daisy’s cell, make sure no Primitives can get in that way. Everyone else, with me.”

Things go from bad to worse as soon as they split up—May and Fitz manage to climb up through the ceiling and get onto the Zephyr before it gets airborne, now loaded with the warhead that some of the other swayed Inhumans—including Giyera and James—brought in. She and Fitz stay hidden in the crawl space beneath the cargo bay until things go quiet above them and she feels the plane go into vertical flight mode.

She jumps out after subduing the only Primitive left in their level

Daisy looks stunned but not happy to see her.

“What are you doing here?” she says tonelessly. In the two days since her return, flesh has returned to its normal color, thanks to multiple transfusions, but Daisy’s eyes still have a hollowed out look that May is all too familiar with.

“Grabbing you, taking back the Zephyr,” May says as Fitz moves to the controls to open the pod.

“Don’t, Fitz!” Daisy nearly shouts as soon as she realizes this, and the engineer freezes, his hands on the controls. “I should be in here. I’m a liability.”

One challenging look sends Fitz a few feet away, and May steps up to the glass, all but glaring at the girl inside.

“You came up to try to stop Hive?”

“I came up to ask him to take me back.”

Startled, May can’t speak for a moment, and Daisy continues to avoid her gaze.

“It’s not just like withdrawal from addiction,” the girl says, digging her nails into her fingers. “I’ve been through that before. But this…it’s like he scraped me out of my own skull. It was like getting recreated. And now without him, I’m just…nothing”

“That’s not true,” May says immediately. “You’re just you again, and you have to remember who that is.”

“But after what I’ve done…” Daisy trails off, shaking her head.

“We’re in the middle of this because of what Hive did,” May says firmly.
“Through me,” Daisy insists.

“You’re the only one trying to put that on yourself.”

Now Daisy finally looks at her, gaze doubtful but nursing the tiniest flicker of hope.

May sighs. “Look, you want to give up, live in a box, go ahead. But that hurt stays in there with you. Believe me—”

She doesn’t finish her sentence before something strikes her hard across the back of the head, and she collapses, dazed, in front of the pod.

“May!” she hears Skye shout, and behind her comes Giyera’s voice.

“Sir, the time-traveler is here!”

But then Fitz shoots him, opens Daisy’s cell unceremoniously, and together the two of them lift May to her feet.

“I’m okay,” she grumbles as they crowd into a lab-use room of the plane and lock the door.

“How did he know you’re a time-traveler?” Fitz mutters, checking the place where May was struck on the head before she can shake him off.

“I told him,” Daisy answers guiltily. “Giyera saw her disappear when he took the Zephyr. Then Alisha saw it later. I told Hive everything when he asked.”

“What did he say?” May mutters, since she’s been wondering about this for days.

“He seemed a little concerned at first that you might go back and change the story, but when I told him you can’t change the past, he just seemed curious. Like you’d be a nice addition to his collection.”

Relieved but not entirely convinced, May nods. “I was worried he might send you with a crystal to try and transform me,” she mutters.

“It might have happened eventually,” Daisy admits, her hands shaking in the high-altitude cold seeping through the plane. “But he had bigger fish to fry first.”

“Well, I disabled the containment module,” Fitz says, shrugging out of his SHIELD windbreaker and draping it around Daisy’s shoulders, “so no one can escape the Zephyr and leave the rest to die with the bomb.”

“What does that mean for us?” Daisy asks, tucking her hands into the coat’s pockets.

“Coulson knows we’re here,” May says rubbing her own arms to warm them. “A quinjet should get here soon, and then we can load the warhead onto it and send it out of the atmosphere while we take back the Zephyr. Daisy, do you have any idea how many people are on this plane besides Hive?”

She doesn’t answer for long enough that both she and Fitz look over. Daisy, still trembling inside the SHIELD jacket, is staring at a gold cross necklace that seems to have come out of one of its pockets.

“Daisy?” Fitz prompts, and she finally looks up.

“Yeah,” she finally says. “That’s what needs to happen. And there are four Primitives on the plane besides James and Hive.”
The minutes leading up to a quinjet docking on the top of the Zephyr feel like hours, and neither of them can get Daisy to speak again before their team comes crashing onto the scene. Coulson is attempting to do without a crutch or cane, so protecting him and Simmons as a Primitive jumps them on the upper level takes all of May’s attention at first. So she doesn’t see it when the Inhuman James manages to get an explosive planted on Lincoln’s side during their fight—none of them see it before it’s nearly too late.

The young man is bleeding badly from his side as they drag him with them back down to the cargo level.

“He’ll live,” Simmons is reassuring Daisy as she checks the wound and hastily dresses it. “Lincoln, I need you to remain as still as possible until we can get back down and I can properly tend to this, all right?”

May watches from a distance as Daisy hovers around Lincoln, the two of them exchanging quiet words while Fitz and Simmons come back to form an anxious huddle with her, Coulson, and Mack.

“So now what?” May asks Coulson as the plane creaks around them.

“Hive and his worker bees will be down here any second,” her director murmurs, looking up at the ceiling, where she hears distant scuttling.

“Even if we could steal the warhead, it’s probably on a timer by now,” Fitz mutters. “Timed with their ascent.”

“I set new coordinates on the quinjet for outer space,” Coulson says. “It’s going to disconnect from the Zephyr, and then fly straight up until it leaves the atmosphere. We’re going to get that warhead onto it, and then when it explodes in the vacuum of space, the pathogen will disperse harmlessly. Solves at least part of the problem.”

“So we’re still going to have to take care of Hive ourselves,” Mack says.

“We can handle him,” Coulson says with frustrating confidence. “But we still need someone to go move the warhead while everyone else deals with Hive the Terrible.”

“Where’s Daisy?” Simmons asks suddenly, and they all look back at Lincoln, still slumped against the wall, but now completely alone.

“I couldn’t stop her,” he whispers weakly.

Three Primitives suddenly drop in from the vents, and all is chaotic for a handful of minutes. May glimpses Hive once, watching the fight from a catwalk above, but by the time the last Primitive is neutralized, the monster is gone.

“He went for Daisy!” Mack shouts, and May’s heart is moving faster than her feet as she tears towards the stairs.

They find Daisy in the control center, nearly screaming into the radio at the quinjet, which has now detached. The warhead is nowhere in sight, and neither is Hive…

And neither is Lincoln.

“I was the only one who could fry the manual controls,” Lincoln’s voice comes from the radio. “It needed to be me.”
“What? No, I saw the future—that’s not what happens!” Daisy gasps in response, not even acknowledging the team as they rush in. She’s grasping at the front of her shirt, seeming confused by the absence of something.

“No,” Lincoln says in the radio. “You said you saw a jet, an agent’s shoulder, and a necklace—and look, premonition bingo!”

May hears Coulson ordering her to call back the quinjet and moves automatically towards the controls, but she can still hear every word Daisy says, her voice cracked with terror.

“No, Lincoln, no…You can’t just die for me, it’s wrong!”

The Zephyr can’t connect to the quinjet—the craft is on a one-way course to space.

“I don’t know, saving the girl I love and the world at the same time? Feels pretty right to me.”

The communication is breaking up as the jet is leaves the atmosphere.

“Lincoln,” Daisy gasps, tears soaking every word, “I can’t take it if…you can’t do this…”

“I wouldn’t have thought so either, but here I am,” Lincoln’s fractured voice returns.

“No I just, you can’t just…say goodbye…I have too much I want to say…”

She’s not just saying that to Lincoln.

May can’t look at Daisy, or she’ll break too. She can’t go forward or back away, so she’s still at the controls when the line goes dead a few seconds later and Daisy scrambles towards her and Coulson.

“Turn it back! Help me!” she gasps, and May still can’t look at her.

“Remote access is offline, Daisy,” Coulson says for her.

“You have to, help me!” she begs, her voice dissolving further.

“The quinjet’s not designed to maneuver in space,” Fitz says quietly. “That’s as far as it can go.”

“No…we have to try! He’s doing this to save us!”

And suddenly May understands.

“She saw a vision of someone on our team dying. She’s convinced that it was you.”

Daisy tried to put herself on the jet to change the future.

Lincoln pushed her out and took her place for the same reason.

But it’s all happening exactly as it was foreseen anyway…

Things only happen the way they happen.

May looks away, towards the cockpit, where she can see the jet through the windscreen, drifting in zero-gravity. She counts the seconds and tries not to focus on Daisy’s sobs behind her. There is a silent flash, sucked instantly into the vacuum of space, and then nothing.

After that, there’s nothing to hear but Daisy as she falls to her knees in tears, nothing to see but Coulson’s knowing gaze as she looks over at him, nothing to feel but sorrow for everything that has
ever touched Daisy, everything that has ever happened because of May’s presence in her life…

She stares through the windscreen at the void of space surrounding their planet, the indifferent universe playing audience to their lives, and realizes that this is the closest she has ever been to a star. And at this moment, she’d tear down every single one if it would give Daisy any protection from all the pain May has brought to her life, year after year after year after year, as reliable as a comet trapped in orbit.

April 22, 2016

In the end, it’s Simmons who takes Daisy back inside when their Zephyr finally touches down again. By then, the girl’s grief has congealed into brokenhearted silence, and everyone else has followed suit. No one speaks except Coulson, who begins giving directions even before May has landed the Zephyr. Reports from remaining agents say that the Primitives in the base have been contained or neutralized, medical has already gotten things set up again to tend to the wounded, and Radcliffe is still in custody.

It’s obvious that they will once again be in recovery mode for awhile because of this, and May at first attempts to busy herself with getting the Zephyr cleared out so that she doesn’t have to think about anything except the task immediately before her. Once this is done, however, she only wants the blood off her clothes, so she heads for her room, planning to quickly change and then hurry back into action.

When she opens her bedroom door, however, she jumps when she sees another figure move in the half-light of her bedside lamp.

For half a second, she thinks Intruder. Then, for a moment, she thinks Jiejie. But then the person perched on the edge of her bed faces her fully, and May’s brain doesn’t know what to think.

For a long, sustained second, the two of them just stare at each other. The girl has dark eyes and brown hair that hangs past her shoulders. She’s wearing May’s clothes, but it’s not a Jiejie, definitely not, but it can’t possibly be…

“…Daisy?”

The girl smiles then, shaking her head and seeming to sigh with relief.

“No. But people tell me all the time that I look just like her.”

Her voice has exactly the same timbre, her head has the exact same tilt. It could only be…

“Halley,” May says disbelievingly.

She looks about fifteen.

The girl smiles wider, climbing off the bed and crossing the small room. She’s taller than May, taller even than Daisy, but her limbs are thin, as if the height is a relatively new thing that the rest of her body hasn’t caught up with yet. The girl wraps her in a fearless, tight hug once she’s close enough, and May hugs her back disbelievingly, feeling the girl’s solid presence and finally accepting that she’s not just imagining this…

“Sorry if I startled you,” Halley says over her shoulder before pulling away and stepping back slightly. “I came to see Mom, because I know today was a bad day…but then I realized that that was
a terrible idea, since she said I never time-travelled to her before I was born, and I was afraid to do that whole butterfly-effect ting, but I figured I could risk seeing you.”

May is still trying to process the impossible presence of a future teenager in her present day, a girl who can’t possibly even exist yet…

“How are you here?”

Halley shrugs. “It’s April 22, right? I’m practicing getting the date right. The last time you saw me traveling, you still hadn’t met me, had you?”

“You’re time-traveling,” May says disbelievingly.

“Yeah,” Halley says, sounding proud of herself.

“So you’re Inhuman?”

The teenager shrugs. “Look at my pedigree—it was kind of inevitable.”

May lifts her chin, doing the math for the first time and realizing what she should have realized months ago.

So that was the way it happened.

“Lincoln was your father?” she asks, just to be sure.

Halley nods. “Yeah. He died today, didn’t he?” Her tone twinges with sadness under the resignation.

May nods, her heart breaking for this girl that she barely knows, but Halley goes on with a sigh before May can offer anything comforting.

“I’ve seen pictures of him, and I’ve thought for a long time about going back to before he died to see what he was like, what he and Mom were like when they were together… But I couldn’t make myself do it. Something told me I would regret it…I don’t know. Maybe I’ll change my mind when I’m older…”

“You can choose when to travel?” May interrupts, and Halley looks up at her, smiling slightly.

“Yeah. Sometimes it gets triggered by some kind of external stressor, like the way it is for you now, but usually I’m travelling intentionally, like you could for a little while.”

Before May can follow up with more questions though, Halley reaches out and puts a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“But what about you…are you okay? I mean, I know today was awful, but besides that…it’s just a couple more weeks right?”

She’s from the future. Of course she knows when…

“Yeah,” May answers, looking away from the girl’s compassionate gaze. “Awful timing.”

“Are you okay?” Halley repeats softly.

“No,” May answers, looking back at the girl, who lowers her hand, looking pained. “Of course not.”

“You’re worried about leaving everyone else at a time like this?” Halley says knowingly, and May
looks away again as she takes a few steps across the carpet, needing to move, needing something to focus on besides the horrible reality of what happened today. She remembers her blood-stained shoes and bends to unfasten them, kicking them into her closet.

“I’m so mad at Lincoln right now…” she mutters, throwing her vest in after it and slamming the closet door. “I thought he would be there for Daisy…after. That he was the way I could go on and not worry about her being alone after I left.”

“And he thought that it was going to be you or Daisy in that plane,” Halley says from behind her. “I think you can figure out the rest.”

May’s breath hitches as the truth runs her through like a sword.

*He knew.*

*He knew someone had to die, he knew Daisy thought it was going to be me…*

*But he also knew I still loved her…*

*Did he also think that she…*

May can hear Halley shifting across the floor behind her, and when she looks back, she sees the girl examining the dreamcatcher hanging from her headboard. She’s smiling slightly as she rubs the suede strands between her fingers, a smile that lingers when she looks up and catches May’s eye.

“If you need to hear it, Daisy’s going to be all right, Ma—May,” the girl says. “Even if my dad hadn’t died today, it wouldn’t have made any difference. She always said losing you was the hardest thing she ever went through. But she’s doing great now.”

“She is?” May breathes, wanting to hear anything to soothe the stab of pain in her heart.

Halley grins widely now. “Yeah, Daisy Johnson’s kind of a hero these days. Of course 2016 was awful for her, and it’s going to be really hard for a while, but I think you’ll be proud of the person she becomes.”

“And she’s your mom,” May says, smiling at the memory of the photos on her own mother’s refrigerator, snapshots of the turn Daisy’s life is about to take.

Halley has a proud look in her eye. “Yeah. And she’s a good one.”

May stares at this girl, who seems to feel the intensity of her gaze but doesn’t shy away from it, just faces her and continues smiling softly, an expression that has so much of *Daisy* in it that May can’t look away.

“I wish I could have had the chance to know you,” she says quietly, and Halley tilts her head sympathetically, approaching May again and pulling her into another, gentler hug.

“Hey, you’ll see me,” the girl says over her shoulder. “The story’s not over yet.”

May wants those words to mean what they sound like. But she just can’t let herself believe them. She doesn’t want hope when the foreseen future has only ever been inevitable. But for now, she holds the future in her arms and tries to reassure herself that however soon her chapter is ending, Daisy’s story will continue, and it won’t be only a tragedy.

“I should probably go,” Halley eventually whispers, leaning back but not letting go of May yet. “But
I should say first…If you’re still trying to decide if you should take Daisy with you next week…I think now you know that you’d better.”

May thinks of the photo of herself and Daisy she saw on her mother’s refrigerator and guesses that means Halley knows exactly where it came from. “I will,” she promises, and Halley smiles.

“I love you,” she says so easily, as if she’s said it many times before, but the words fall painfully on May’s ears.

“You don’t know me,” she says, shaking her head, but Halley is undeterred, just shrugging with another smile.

“Yeah, I do,” she says gently. “See you.”

May hears the familiar sound at the same second she feels the solidness disappear from the clothes, and just like that, she’s alone again.
Resolution

Chapter Summary

A farewell tour

Chapter Notes

Guys, this chapter was a trip.

I had maybe 200 words prewritten of things I thought would happen in this chapter, but most of what's here is stuff I hadn't even predicted until I started writing.

This also kind of felt like an entirely different fic as I left canon material behind...so I hope everything still feels in-character.

Also, I doubt I'll have the next chapter out before July, but stay tuned, the goal is to have everything posted by the end of summer. Fingers crossed!

April 23-30, 2016—Melinda is 46, Daisy is 27

This has been, without a doubt, the worst month of Melinda’s life.

Had she not Coulson’s full assurance that Radcliffe will face a prison sentence for what he’s done, Melinda might have resolved to put him in a coma before he leaves their custody. More than two dozen of their agents have been transformed into mindless mutants by the pathogen he created at Hive’s command, including a few that she considered friends, and at this point the scientist is trying to tell them that the change is irreversible. With Hive gone, the Primitives have no more “master” to follow, leaving the former agents virtually catatonic in their confinement in the lower levels. Eventually, Coulson has them put in ATCU-issue stasis, has Radcliffe working around the clock for a cure, and has the Playground is searched top to bottom for any more hidden pathogen deliveries.

May pulls her weight in the first few days following the attack, doing her part to get everyone on solid-enough ground again. She can still hear the countdown clock ticking in the back of her mind through every moment, but for now, this is the most important thing—leaving everyone in a place where they can manage without her. Once the dust has settled a bit and they’re all on the right track again, she tracks Coulson down in his office.

“I know we just lost one and you may not be able to spare another,” she says, standing barely inside the door of his office, “but I was wondering if I could borrow a quinjet for a few days.”

It looks like Coulson’s hairline has receded another half-inch in the past few weeks, and the bags under his eyes tell her that he’s been sleeping about as well as she has been.

“A jet?” he repeats, gesturing her into the office, where she continues to stand somewhat formally in front of this desk. “What do you have in mind?”
“There’s a few places I’d like to go…before,” she says, counting on him to understand without making her spell it out. “And it would be a big help to not have to fly commercial.”

She can tell he’s trying not to show her how much it hurts him to be reminded what’s looming, but she sees it in his eyes anyway.

“How long do you want it for?” he asks quietly.

“A week—maybe two, if you can spare it,” she answers. “I haven’t really fixed any plans yet…”

“Whatever you need,” her friend says immediately. “Are you sure you don’t want to take the Zephyr?”

“No need to burn that much fuel,” she says, attempting a grateful smile. “And it’ll just be a small crew.”

“You’re taking a crew?” he repeats, and she takes a deep breath.

“I’m going to ask Daisy to go with me.”

Daisy.

The girl has barely left her room since they got back from the Hive mission. May has glimpsed her in the halls only twice in the past week, both times on what seemed to be simply excursions out to the community bathroom. The girl’s eyes had been red-rimmed and puffy, and it was obvious she didn’t want to speak to anyone, even Jemma, who had been persistent in bringing the girl food trays at least once a day, though they usually appeared outside her door again looking barely touched.

“You think she’ll say yes?” Coulson asks, and May purses her lips sadly.

“I know she will,” she answers quietly. “And…I was wondering if, while I’m here, I could get that thing I asked you to keep for me last year…”

He’s already unlocking the drawer of his desk.

“Does this mean what I think it means?” he asks, shooting her a perplexed look as he extracts the item from the back of the drawer.

“I don’t think so,” she says, taking the box as he passes it over. “But I want her to have it, regardless.”

The exchange done, they both stand in heavy silence for a moment longer before Coulson eventually meets her eyes again.

“Am I saying goodbye to you right now?” he asks, sounding like it’s the last thing he wants to do.

“No,” Melinda says quickly. “I’ll come back before to see everyone here… and to make sure Daisy gets back to you all.”

“Good,” he says quietly, nodding once. “Promise me we’ll talk again before…”

“I promise,” she says certainly. “We’ll have time.”

Daisy’s door is not locked when she tries the handle after knocking twice and receiving no answer. Melinda tries to tell herself this is a good sign, but the lights are off despite it being nearly noon, and
Daisy is buried beneath the covers of her bed, not even acknowledging Melinda as she opens the
door.

“Daisy,” she says softly towards the pile of blankets, and when she still receives no answer, Melinda
leaves the door open while she crosses the room and turn on the lamp. Daisy barely moves, just tucks
her head further beneath the edge of the covers like a turtle withdrawing into its shell, and Melinda
returns to close the door before approaching the girl’s bedside.

“Daisy,” she repeats, kneeling next to the bed. “I know this is awful. I know there is nothing I can
say to make this better or easier. But I’m so, so sorry about Lincoln.”

Daisy remains still and silent beneath the covers, her head turned away, so Melinda continues,
wanting to reach for Daisy’s hand but unsure where to find it beneath the blankets.

“I’ve been making some plans in the past week, and I’m going to go away from here for a little
while,” she says quietly. “There’s a few places I want to see while I’ve got time…and I’d like to take
you with me, if you’re willing to go.”

This time she waits, certain that Daisy heard her, needing this to be the girl’s choice.

When the response finally comes though, it’s a question, not an answer.

“Does it have to be now?”

*Is there no more time?*

Melinda swallows and takes a deep breath. “Yes.”

*It’s time.*

Daisy finally moves, uncurling her body and rolling over to face Melinda. Her eyes are no longer
red.

They just look defeated.

“Where are we going?” the girl asks, and May slowly rises from her feet.

“I’ll pack for both of us,” she says, pulling a duffel out from beneath the bed that was once theirs.
One of Lincoln’s t-shirts comes out with it, and May nudges it out of sight again with her toe. “If you
can be ready to leave in an hour, I was hoping to get going today.”

By the time she leaves the room with the bag half-full of clothes, Daisy has only managed to sit up in
bed and put her feet on the floor. When May comes back to check on her forty-five minutes later,
however, the girl appears to have showered and put on clean clothes, though she still looks like only
a shell of herself.

“Is there anything specific I should bring?” she asks, gesturing to the backpack on her desk chair
where May can see her laptop and charger already packed.

“I think I have what we’ll need,” May answers, gesturing to the bag hanging from her shoulder. “But
bring what you want.”

Ten minutes later, they are both walking through the halls towards the hangar when they cross paths
with Simmons.

“May!” she calls from behind them, audibly chasing them down, and May turns back. There’s a
desperate look in the girl’s eyes as she races up to them, one that makes Melinda wonder what she’s heard from Daisy or Phil, or what she’s possibly only guessed at…

“We’ll be back, Simmons,” she says quickly, not just to assuage the scientist but for Daisy’s benefit as well. “Next week, for sure. We’ll be back.”

Simmons looks back and forth between May and Daisy twice before finally nodding, leaning forward to wrap Daisy in a hug. Daisy’s arms go around her somewhat mechanically, but she doesn’t flinch away.

“I hope wherever you’re headed, it’s beautiful,” she says to May when she finally steps back.

Melinda feels her heart breaking already, so she just pats Simmons’ arm once before turning towards the hangar door again.

They climb the ramp of the same quinjet that brought Daisy back from Hive, the same one that carried Andrew’s body back to them, and May stows their bag and sends a text message from her phone before beginning her pre-flight checks.

“Where are we going first?” Daisy asks, climbing into the co-pilot’s seat beside her slipping her own headset on.

May doesn’t answer until the checks are done and she’s ordered the hangar doors to open. The blue sky spreads out above them as she closes the jet’s ramp and puts her hands on the controls.

“Home.”

April 30-May 3, 2016

Daisy:

In the days following Hive, following Lincoln, Daisy has felt too many things to feel anything clearly. Her mind feels so loud that it’s easy enough to let everything become a blanket of black noise—it’s practically the only way she can remember basic functions like breathing. Physically, she guesses she must still be recovering from Hive's sway and the blood loss of the weeks before, but the fatigue feels compounded by the grief that threatens to swallow her whole if she loses focus long enough. Grief over what she did to her team. Grief over Andrew and Lincoln, dead because of her. Grief knowing that another loss is still ahead, one that, at this point, she’s not sure she’ll be able to survive.

May’s invitation to join her is a blessing and a curse—to be invited into her last days feels like an honor. But to know that the clock is running out, that this is her last chance to do anything at all with the person she’s loved most in her whole life…

But she came. She's here.

She wouldn’t miss this for the world.

May has no trouble landing their quinjet at PHL, tucking it into a secure hangar and leading Daisy out to an SUV that is waiting with the keys in the ignition.

“Coulson called ahead,” she says in explanation as she fires up the engine. “Better than landing the jet on a cul-du-sac.”
The quiet drive to her mother’s neighborhood takes them on the highway past the downtown area, and Daisy watches the roads roll by, wondering what it might feel like for a person to have such a reliable return point in her life—a place where, even thirty years after leaving it, May still knows every turn in the road that will lead her back to it.

The neighborhood is full of red-brick homes and dark-trunked oaks, and May finally turns the car into a driveway of a split-level home in the middle of a street. There is a single-car garage and an assortment of plants filling the porch.

It looks fantastically ordinary.

“I told her we were coming,” May says as she puts the car in park and kills the engine. “That’s all I’ve told her so far.”

The silence that follows is meaningful, and Daisy nods.

Of course, May would want to tell her mom everything in person.

May is already out of the car and has their bag over her shoulder by the time Daisy manages to open the passenger door, and her hand slips into Daisy’s as her feet touch the pavement.

Surprised, Daisy looks at her, seeing only concern in May’s gaze.

“You ready?” she asks, and Daisy isn’t sure how to answer when she has literally no idea what she’s walking into, but she nods.

May doesn’t drop her hand until they reach the doormat and she rings the bell.

The woman who answers the door is little—that’s the only adjective Daisy can process at first. The top of the woman’s graying head comes just above May’s chin, and it’s so strange to see anyone shorter than May that Daisy doesn’t even remember to smile as the screen door opens.

“Melinda,” the older woman says, a brief smile warming her features, though she doesn’t reach out to hug her daughter. “Good to see you.”

“Hi, Mom,” May says, one hand coming to rest lightly on Daisy’s back. “This is Daisy.”

No title, no preface, no mention of everything else between them that has preceded this moment. For now, however, Daisy is grateful—it makes this beginning a little simpler.

“Hello,” she says, automatically extending her hand as the woman does the same. “Daisy Johnson.”

“Lian Mei,” the woman in front of her says, shaking her hand briefly in a strong grip. “You can call me ‘Ayi’. Please come in.”

May holds the door open for her to follow Lian inside, then falls in step beside Daisy as they pass through a small entryway.

“Someday, I hope you’ll give me more than a few hours’ warning that you’re coming,” the older woman says, leading the way into a living room and gesturing for them to sit down. “I only had time to clean—haven’t made it out to the market yet.”

Lian turns in the direction of the kitchen, but Daisy follows May’s lead and sits down on the sofa, a piece of furniture that looks barely worn yet bears an upholstery that screams of the 1980s.

“She’s had this since I was in high school,” May mutters as if reading her mind, catching Daisy’s eye
with a knowing look. “Keeps it covered in plastic when company’s not here.”

“Tā hē kāfēi ma?” Lian calls from the kitchen where Daisy thinks she hears a kettle being filled.

“Coffee or tea?” May translates, and Daisy suddenly feels self-conscious.

“What you’re drinking,” she answers, and May calls something back to her mother in Chinese.

“What does Ai yi mean?” Daisy murmurs before Lian comes back in to set three mugs on the coffee table.

“It means ‘auntie,”’ May says, her eyes following her mother as she goes back to the kitchen. “In Chinese culture, it’s polite to call your friends’ parents ‘aunt’ and ‘uncle’—you wouldn’t dream of calling them by their first names.”

“Chīle ma?” Lian says as she enters again with a just-boiled kettle in one hand and a plate of small oranges in the other. “Daisy, have you eaten yet?”

It’s three in the afternoon, but Daisy would be lying if she said she had. Instead, she takes an orange from the plate and immediately begins peeling it while Lian pours hot water into the mugs.

“Thank you, Ai yi,” she says, trying out the word. She glimpses May smiling slightly out of the corner of her eye as she passes one of the drinks over to Daisy, setting it in front of her on the table. She stays mostly quiet and eats a couple of oranges as May and her mom exchange small talk that, while it sounds rather perfunctory, does not seem to be uncomfortable for them. Lian never asks May why she’s suddenly able or willing to visit, making Daisy wonder exactly what explanation May has given over the phone for their sudden arrival.

“What would you like for dinner?” Lian asks, suddenly addressing Daisy. Startled and unprepared to answer, she looks helplessly at May, who sets her cup down.

“Could we all go to the store together?” she suggests, and Lian nods, immediately getting to her feet.

“You’re going to be here for three days, you’d best pick the groceries,” the older woman says as she goes to fetch her purse.

“I can drive,” May calls after her, also getting to her feet.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Lian calls back from the other room, and Daisy sees May smile. At a nearby supermarket, she and her mom talk through a meal plan for their visit and collect the necessary things while Daisy trails along behind them, agreeing to nearly every suggestion and enjoying the spectacle of May in such a domestic setting—she’s hardly ever set foot in a shop with her before.

“I’ll go get the meat,” Lian says at one point as she bags up some red grapes. “Why don’t you two go pick out a white and a red, and whatever you’d like to have for breakfast? I only have bread, eggs, and milk.”

“I don’t think either of us actually want wine,” May says quickly. “But we’ll go find some muffin mix.”

She slips a hand around Daisy’s shoulder for a brief moment to steer her in the right direction. It’s a small gesture, seemingly done out of habit, but it means worlds to Daisy that after everything that’s
happened in the past month, May isn’t afraid to touch her.

“So your mom never taught you how to cook?” Daisy says once they’re a safe distance away in the baking mix aisle. “She seems to know her way around the raw foods section just fine.”

“I went into SHIELD and college straight out of high school,” May reminds her, scanning the shelves as they walk. “And when I was in high school, she was a new single mom—I don’t think she wanted me to burn the house down trying to cook when she wasn’t home.”

“Is there anything you do know how to make that has more than two ingredients?” Daisy teases, though the smile she attempts feels a little rusty.

“These call for an egg, milk, and water,” May says, tossing Daisy a box of blueberry muffin mix, which she catches in the shopping basket. “Does that count?”

Back at the house, Daisy helps unpack the groceries from their fabric shopping bags while May puts them away, seeming perfectly familiar with the layout of the fridge and cupboards.

“If you two want to eat before eight o’clock, we’d better get started now,” Lian says, pulling a cutting board down from a hook on the wall once one of the countertops is clear.

“What can I do?” Daisy asks, but Lian waves her off.

“You’re the guest,” she says. “You relax.”

“And what am I?” May grumbles, though she immediately takes the vegetables to the sink to start washing them.

“You’re the indentured servant I never got my money’s worth out of,” her mother responds, beginning to peel cloves of garlic.

Daisy feels scandalized on May’s behalf at such a comment, but behind Lian, May catches her eye with a wink.

“You can look around the house, Daisy,” she suggests. “Or see if there’s anything good on TV.”

The idea of walking around without the host feels inappropriate, but Lian doesn’t correct her daughter, so Daisy drifts out to the living room again, inspecting everything more closely this time. A sofa, a recliner, and an entertainment center fill most of the small space, and bookshelves crowd the walls between them. Daisy scans the spines and sees multiple genres, topics, and languages, and in small windows between bookends stand a few potted plants and framed photographs. Some are black and white photos of people Daisy doesn’t recognize. One is of Lian, looking far younger, shaking hands with President Reagan. One is of a baby, and Daisy picks it up to inspect it until she’s sure it really is the person she’s known her whole life.

Baby Melinda May had such chubby cheeks.

A short hallway leads off the living room to a single bathroom and three bedrooms. One appears to be converted entirely to an office, and more books crowd the shelves in there, as well as a desktop computer that appears to be from the nineties. A few potted succulents take up space in every windowsill, even in the bathroom, and in the hallway itself, more framed photos crowd out the white space.

Daisy stands there for a while, looking at Lian’s life—May’s life—displayed in still moments before her eyes, realizing that this is what May has experienced in vivo through her visits to Daisy’s
childhood over the years—snapshots of her becoming herself.

She can hear May and her mom talking in low voices in the kitchen, and she wonders what her former S.O. is telling her. Only a handful of minutes later, however, May joins her in the hallway.

“High school graduation?” Daisy asks as May approaches, nodding towards the photo of a teenaged May in a bright blue cap and gown, barely smiling as she holds up her diploma. “You were already practicing your unamused glare back then?”

“Any traditional photo op is a good time to practice,” May answers, stopping beside Daisy and facing the wall of memories too.

“Do you know who everyone is?” Daisy asks in a quiet voice, holding herself tighter and thinking of the box of photos she brought back from Afterlife, the only mementos of her roots that she got to keep.

What’s it like to know who’s in your family photos?

May nods.

“Tell me.”

She does.

By the time Lian calls for May to help set the table, they’ve made it back to the living room and have turned on the evening news. This time, Daisy doesn’t let Lian shoo her out as she follows May to the dining room, and within minutes, the table is set and the glasses are full. May points Daisy into one of the chairs, then helps her mother carry plates in from the kitchen.

“This looks great,” Daisy breathes as the lazy Susan fills with food, amazed to feel her mouth watering. She’s barely had any appetite since…well, since, but now, her stomach is practically snarling with hunger.

“I tried not to make it too spicy,” Lian says, picking up their plates to serve them all rice first. “Melinda wasn’t sure how you’d take to uncensored Chinese flavor.”

“Don’t hold back for my sake,” Daisy says, taking the plate as it’s handed to her. There are four different stir-fried dishes of meats and vegetables, plus a serving of rice, and Daisy’s plate has barely hit its placemat again before she’s digging in.

“What do you plan to do while you’re here?” Lian eventually asks after a few minutes of quiet eating, looking across the table at May, who glances once at Daisy as she answers.

“I have some ideas for tomorrow—I was hoping to take Daisy around town for part of the day.”

Lian nods.

“This house still only has one guest bed, you know,” her mother reminds her. “You’ll be on the sofa tonight.”

“I don’t mind sharing if she doesn’t,” Daisy says quickly, looking at Lian and not at May.

Lian’s eyes remain on her daughter, who shrugs minutely in the corner of her eye.

“All right then,” her mother concedes, picking up Daisy’s plate and serving her seconds without asking if she wants more. “I’m sure her back will thank you.”
“Mom…” May grumbles, picking up her chopsticks and reaching for more tomatoes and eggs.

Another pause follows, then Lian turns to Daisy.

“Melinda told me that she trained you,” she says, and Daisy nods, wondering if May told her mom anything else about their history. “Did she do a good job?”

Daisy’s lips pull into a smile as she glances at May. “I think so.”

“I imagine you have some questions about your S.O.,” Lian says next, and Daisy’s face lights up.

“So many!” she exhales, looking disbelievingly at Lian.

“Well, we’d better get started then,” the woman says, setting her chopsticks aside and folding her hands. “You’ve only got three days here.”

Daisy glances at May, who offers a brief, resigned smile before Daisy looks back at her mother.

“She once told me that she jumped out of a tree when she was five because she was testing a homemade parachute—what was that like?”

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**Melinda:**

She tries to help her mother clear the table when dinner is over, but her mom shoos her back into the living room. “That girl won’t relax unless you do,” she says, filling the sink with soapy water. “Find something to do together.”

But almost as soon as they sit down on the sofa again, Daisy’s energy seems to spiral.

“Your mom’s great,” she says, sinking heavily into the cushions and drawing her legs in to wrap her arms around them. Despite the amount of time Daisy has spent alone in her room these past few days, it seems to have been a long time since she had a decent night of sleep.

“I think she likes you too,” Melinda says sincerely, and Daisy smiles.

“Hard to tell, since you two have the same poker face,” she murmurs, shifting over slightly until her head rests on Melinda’s shoulder. “I guess it runs in the family.”

Melinda flips on the TV, finding a channel that’s playing M*A*S*H* reruns, and leans back into the sofa only half-listening to the characters, half-listening to her mother humming as she washes dishes and to Daisy breathing beside her. By the time her mother finishes the dishes and joins them in the living room, Daisy seems to be sound asleep, curled on the sofa like a cat with her head pillowed on May’s thigh. Her mother takes in their position and immediately looks at Melinda a raised eyebrow.

“I’ll get her to bed,” Melinda says quietly, turning off the TV.

Daisy wakes enough to get to her feet and follow May sleepily down the hall to the guest bedroom where she’d left their things earlier. It’s not the first time, or even the second time, that she’s put Daisy to bed, she realizes, though the girl is more than twenty years older than the last time she did it.

“Do you want to change clothes?” she asks in the light of the bedroom lamp as Daisy sinks easily down into the double bed.

“No…” the girl mumbles, slipping off her socks and jeans before climbing beneath the covers. “You
promise you’ll come sleep in here tonight?” she says as her head hits the pillow.

“I promise,” May murmurs, flipping off the lamp and brushing a hand over Daisy’s shoulder as she turns to go. “Goodnight.”

“May?” Daisy whispers behind her as she reaches the door, and Melinda looks back. In this moment, Daisy looks so much like her four-year-old self that it makes her chest go tight.

“Thanks for bringing me,” the girl whispers, and May smiles.

“I’m glad you came.”

Out in the living room, her mother has changed the television over to CNN and has taken up her spot in the recliner with her crocheting, though she sets it down as Melinda walks in.

“I don’t recall you ever letting Andrew sit that close to you under my roof,” Lian says knowingly, and Melinda shakes her head, sitting down at the end of the sofa closest to her mother.

“There’s a lot to the story…”

“But you are together?” her mother says knowingly, and Melinda nods, surprised how easy her mother is making it for her to say.

“Were. For about a year. 2014.”

“Was that before or after I picked you up on a highway in Ontario?”

_The fall of SHIELD. A lifetime ago._

“After,” Melinda answers. “But not long after.”

“So you were training her…and dating her…” Lian says, still crocheting steadily. “I thought there were SHIELD policies against that…”

“Mom…” Melinda interrupts, reaching for the remote and turning off the TV. “There’s a lot I need to tell you.”

It takes a long time, but her mother listens nearly without moving as Melinda unspools the story, of Daisy, of the past, distant and recent, and of the future. She can’t bear to face her mother during the more painful parts, but Melinda does her best to not hold any part of the story back—the least she can do for her mother now is to let her into every part of her life, the good and the bad.

When it’s all told, Melinda sits quietly, waiting for her mother’s response. Lian’s gaze is now directed at the darkened TV screen, but Melinda can practically hear the wheels turning in her head as her mother attempts to process everything she’s just heard.

“So what you’re telling me,” Lian eventually says slowly, her crocheting abandoned on her lap, “is that this is the last time I’m going to see you?”

“You will see me again,” Melinda assures her quickly, her own hands folded tightly on her lap even though she longs to reach over for her mother. “Right here. Some years down the road, right here in this house, we’ll see each other again. But…this is the last time for a while.”

Her mother is quiet as she lowers the footrest of the recliner, as she sets her crocheting aside and gets to her feet, as she picks up her empty cup and moves towards the kitchen.
“Will you be up early for tai chi?” the old woman asks as she goes.

“Yes,” Melinda calls after her, not sure what she wanted her mother to say but wishing she were saying more than this.

“See you in the morning then,” her mother’s voice comes from the darkness beyond. “Good night.”

Daisy does not stir when Melinda climbs into the other side of the guest bed a little while later, but the girl is barely pressed against her side when she wakes up the next morning, as if just trying to make sure she is still there.

Daisy:

The next three days pass like a dream.

May is already awake and talking to her mother at the table before Daisy makes it out of bed each morning, but Lian always has muffins, fresh fruit, and coffee for her as she joins them at the table. Daisy notices that the conversation slowly becomes less awkward as the days pass, each of them slowly getting reacquainted with the others.

For most of the first full day, May takes her out around Philadelphia, pointing out the historical sites but also pointing out places significant to herself alone.

“That’s the high school I graduated from.”

“That florist shop used to be a bookstore—I liked to do homework there after school.”

“That place has the best pizza in the neighborhood, except for the margherita. No one’s margherita pizza was better than Othello’s.”

On their way back into her mother’s suburb that afternoon, May seems to make a snap decision as she drives down a four-lane road and suddenly pulls into a parking lot. “Bring your jacket,” she tells Daisy as they climb out of the car.

She barely glimpses the sign as she hurries into the building after May—The Arctic Edge—but a blast of impossibly cold air is waiting on the other side of the second set of sliding glass doors, and Daisy understands even before she processes what’s waiting beyond.

May is paying for their admission already when Daisy catches up to her.

“What size?” the girl behind the counter asks, and May looks at Daisy questioningly.

“You don’t have to if you don’t—“

“Nine and a half,” Daisy interrupts, and the girl turns to pull a pair of skates out of a wall of shelves behind her.

It’s been two years already since they last skated together in London, and though Daisy feels a little more familiar than a first timer, she stays on the wall most of the time. May’s hand never leaves her grip, but after a turn or three, Daisy finds herself feeling tired.

“Can I watch you for a little while?” she asks as they near the exit, and Maysqueezees her hand as she releases her through it.
Leaning against the safety glass, Daisy watches May round the rink again on the black figure skates Daisy had given her on their only Christmas spent together. Just like every time before, she feels the bloom of awe at May’s relaxed movements, the way she makes sliding across ice on a pair of blades look absolutely natural, the effortless turns and building of speed. She doesn’t know the names for the moves May works through as she rounds the rink a few times, forward and then backwards, then as she moves to the center and does a few different spins. Almost too late, Daisy pulls out her phone and records the last few minutes of her circuit, knowing it might be her last chance.

“Want to come out again?” May says when she skates back to where Daisy is waiting a few minutes later, and she nods, slipping her hand into May’s as they slide out onto the ice together again. Neither of them say anything as they skate together awhile longer, but at least the silence of everything they aren’t talking about is muffled for a little while by the sounds of their blades cutting across the ice.

Back at Lian’s house that afternoon, May brings out a photo album from somewhere in her mother’s office.

“I think I owe you,” she says, holding it out to Daisy where she sits on the couch, nursing an afternoon cup of coffee.

“This had better be what I think it is,” she says with a grin, setting her mug aside and taking it eagerly.

Lian joins them only a few pages in and adds her narration to May’s, telling stories that Daisy tries frantically to memorize along with all the images of young May at various ages and places, the part of her story Daisy was never a part of. There are birthdays and holidays, skating competitions and martial arts tournaments. There are pictures with family members and a few pictures with Coulson, and, of course, there are pictures of her with Andrew. Daisy still feels a twinge of jealousy at these but presses it down, telling herself she’s happy to see these pictures at all. May turns past those pages somewhat quickly, and Lian doesn’t say anything about Andrew as they pass, making Daisy wonder what May has told her mother about how Andrew’s story ended.

She can feel the weight of the older woman’s gaze as she leans on May’s shoulder and listens to the stories, but May doesn’t nudge her away, so Daisy move either.

As they flip back to the beginning of the book so that Lian can add her stories to the pages she missed, May gets hung up on a picture of herself as a toddler playing on a beach. She’s staring down at the photo for so long that Daisy looks closer too, wondering what May is seeing. The black-haired little girl in her swim shirt and sunhat isn’t looking at the camera, intently focused on the spade she’s digging into the wet sand. Behind her, a gorgeous beach stretches on to the horizon, broken up by only a handful of other people in the sand and surf. Nothing seems amiss, but May is still staring hard at it.

“What is it?” Daisy asks quietly, trying to narrow down the focus of May’s gaze.

“That’s…“ May says disbelievingly, her fingertip passing over one of the people in the background—a young woman with brown hair wrapped in a beach towel sitting on the sand a few feet behind the toddler, smiling and waving directly at the camera and looking rather proud of herself.

“That’s who? You knew her?” Daisy asks, looking closer. She doesn’t recognize the face.

“Never mind,” May says quickly, turning the page, and Daisy doesn’t press further.

After they’ve finished another amazing dinner that night, Lian goes back to the kitchen with some of the empty dishes, and May puts her hand on Daisy’s when she tries to get up to follow.
“Wait.”

When May’s mother returns carrying a frosted cake covered in lit candles, Daisy is only confused.

“It’s not…”

“I missed last year, though,” May says quietly, releasing her hand beneath the table. “And I guess we both missed twenty-six.”

“Shall we sing?” Lian prompts as she sets the cake in front of Daisy and takes her seat again.

Daisy stares intently into the candle flames and tries to smile as the pair softly sing the familiar song, realizing this is the first time she’s ever heard May sing.

Trying not to think about how it could be the last time too.

She manages to stay awake a little later that night, but she still heads to bed before May, leaving her talking quietly to her mother in the living room, conversations she can only imagine but understands ought to be had alone.

Lian joins them in the car the next day as May drives them out of town, north by northwest through forested hills to a place not two hours away called Kempton. When they pull into a lot beyond a sign that reads *Hawk Mountain*, Lian swaps into the driver’s seat as Daisy pulls on the pair of her tennis shoes that seem to have appeared out of nowhere in the car.

“Three o’clock?” Lian asks as May pulls a backpack from the trunk and shoulders it.

“I’ll call you if sooner,” May says with a nod before Lian drives away.

“This was my favorite place when I wanted to get out of town,” May explains as she leads Daisy towards a trailhead without stopping to check the map board. “We’re here at a good time, so it’s worth the trip.”

They’re both as in-shape as SHIELD agents are supposed to be, but Daisy is surprised how quickly she tires throughout the hour-long uphill hike. It seems like May is being unnecessarily attentive, reminding her to drink water as they climb at a relaxed pace, but Daisy powers through without complaint. Spring has run its course in the mountain forest, so the trail is mostly shaded by the stretching cedars and oaks that flank the path. The air is fresh and the world is quiet, and Daisy can guess that this is why May likes it.

At a place called the North Lookout, the trees open up to a vista of green mountains, and May slips off the backpack as she sits down on a boulder.

“It’s spring migration,” she says as Daisy joins her on her perch. From the backpack comes a packed lunch and a pair of binoculars. “I’ll let you know when there’s something to see.”

They’re nearly done with their sandwiches when May suddenly picks up the binoculars, looking out at something Daisy can’t see until May thrusts them at her.

“There,” she announces, crowding beside Daisy to point the binoculars in the right direction. “You see them?”

“Oh my god,” Daisy breathes as the objects of their attention finally comes into view. “I’ve never even seen one before.”
It’s a pair of bald eagles.

The birds pass close enough to the mountain that they eventually lower the binoculars to watch without them, the way the birds of prey do so little flapping, seeming to simply glide on air currents, up and down, banking and circling occasionally.

“They’re solitary birds, most of the time,” May says as the pair eventually disappears in the distance. “Those two might be nesting.”

“So is birdwatching another secret hobby of yours?” Daisy asks, smiling over at her friend, but May shakes her head.

“Just an excuse to get away. I came for the quiet.”

*Sounds about right,* Daisy thinks, looking out over the valley again.

Dinner back at Lian’s that night is as delicious as the previous nights, though not nearly as quiet.

“Thanks, Ayi,” Daisy says as May’s mom hands her refilled plate back to her—she’s been ravenous since they finished the hike earlier that afternoon.

“Tā kèyì jiào wǒ ‘māmā’,” Lian says as she picks up her chopsticks again.

The words seem to be for May, who freezes with her own utensils halfway to her mouth, staring at her mother.

“What did she say?” Daisy asks, glancing quickly between the two of them.

Lian meets May’s eyes, nodding once as if to say, *You heard me right.* May lowers her chopsticks back to her plate.

“She says you can call her ‘mama’,” she translates, looking over at Daisy. “If you want.”

It seems like such a small thing, but Daisy senses that there is something significant about this from the way May is staring at her mom, looking both grateful and heartbroken.

“I’ll explain later,” she whispers under her breath as she ducks her head towards her plate again.

Breakfast the next morning feels suddenly awkward again, but Daisy assumes that’s entirely due to the looming goodbye. As May shoulders their bag afterwards and their head for the door, Lian pats her arm as Daisy thanks her again and again for her hospitality and smiles as they all step out onto the porch together.

“You call me if you need any help in the future,” Lian says seriously, staring at her until Daisy nods. “Melinda said she’d make sure you have my number.”

“Thank you…Mama,” Daisy says with a smile, but when she glances at May, she only holds out the car keys.

Daisy goes to wait in the car as May says goodbye to her mother on the front porch. She watches the exchange without hearing their words, seeing the way May’s head bows more than once, the way she shifts on her feet, the way Lian stands somewhat stiffly as May leans in to hug her, the way she wipes her eyes quickly after May turns away to descend the short set of steps down to the sidewalk. Daisy rolls down the window as May climbs into the driver’s seat, looking at Lian because she’s sure she’ll cry if she looks at May.
“Thanks for everything, Mama!” Daisy calls to the woman still standing on the porch, and Lian actually smiles as she raises a hand in goodbye as they reverse out of the driveway.

“It’s polite to call all your friends’ moms ‘aunt’ in Chinese,” May says while wiping her eyes with the heel of her hand as they roll off down the street, pre-empting the question that Daisy has been waiting to ask her. “But you only call one person in your life ‘mama’ until the day you get married. From then on, you’re considered a daughter to two mothers.”

Daisy doesn’t know what to say, but something hopeful expands in her chest, displacing the tiniest bit of all the heaviness that has been growing there for the past year.

May 5-8, 2016

Melinda:

She knew visiting her dad was necessary, but she wasn’t ready for how hard it would be to say goodbye to him after only two nights under his roof. Daisy had been a good sport and a good guest, but Melinda has seen her snowballing fatigue and poor attempts to conceal morning sickness on two of the past three days. There isn’t much time left anyway, and May would rather let Daisy spend them without the burden of being a guest in someone’s house, especially with the state she’s in.

Now, as she drives another SUV down another road in another state, she wonders if she made the right decision, bringing Daisy with her. The girl had been visibly uncomfortable throughout their flight over the Pacific, but Melinda had tried to not say anything out of the ordinary as she attempted to comfort Daisy through her nausea, knowing full well it wasn’t just air-sickness.

After a few minutes in fresh air once Melinda had landed the plane, Daisy had perked up, looking around their destination excitedly.

“How many days do we get here?” she asks, smiling around at the palm trees and sunshine.

“A few days,” Melinda answered vaguely. “I’ve always loved Maui.”

She had booked a hotel for this part of the trip, a two-bedroom suite in one of the nicest beachfront hotels on the island. The first day, they take it easy, just heading down to the beach for a few hours before walking down the shore in search of dinner, but Daisy’s energy runs out long before sunset, thanks in part to jet lag.

May sits on their hotel room’s balcony while Daisy showers and gets ready for bed, enjoying the distant cadence of the ocean and the slow slide of day into night as the world turns. Despite being built entirely on volcanos, Hawaii has always felt to her like a refuge from the rest of the world, safe and insulated from every other assault the planet endures.

“It’s beautiful,” Daisy says quietly when she joins her out on the balcony later to say goodnight. Her hand rests on the back of Melinda’s lounge chair, but she’s looking up at the sky.

“It really is,” Melinda agrees as she stars slowly emerge from the dusk. She makes her hands stay on her own lap.

A silent moment later, Daisy turns to go back inside.

“Goodnight then,” she calls, headed for one of the bedrooms.
Melinda stays out for another hour before heading in for her own shower and a good night’s rest. She’s alone when she falls asleep, but she’s not alone when she wakes up.

**Daisy:**

She has no complaint about Maui itself, but Daisy desperately wishes she were seeing it under other circumstances.

The island is beautiful, absolutely beautiful, and she understands how it could easily make the top of someone’s list of favorite places on the planets. This time of year doesn’t appear to be peak tourist season, but even with the crashing sea around them, everything has a hushed feel to it—as if the island itself is keeping every secret it witnesses, keeping them sacred.

They go to beautiful places throughout the next few days. Rainforests and waterfalls. Overlooks. Beaches. May explains at one point that her father had been stationed at the Air Force base in Hawaii when she was small, so her first memories were of this place. Daisy does her best to enjoy the time they have and forget the reason for it, to not let herself dwell on wishful thoughts that they could have done something like this before, when times were better. She’s never seen May in a place like this without it being for a mission. She’s never seen her skin brown in the sun, never seen her walk barefoot over sand, never seen her climb a waterfall or dive into the ocean with abandon.

She’s never seen her this…herself.

But even with all the walking and relaxing the two of them do together over those days, their conversations are slowly spread thinner and thinner, as if they’re running out of words along with time. They both know what’s coming, they both it’s not far off, but Daisy is willing to pretend she’s forgotten about it as long as May is too.

It isn’t long, however, before her control finally cracks.

“May, I think I’m pregnant.”

They’re sitting waist-deep in a pool fed by a short waterfall that morning, alone except for the fauna, when Daisy blurts it out. It was only after throwing up this morning after breakfast (the fourth time in a week) that the possibility even entered her mind, but the longer she thought about it while they hiked today, the more likely it seemed. She hadn’t been paying much attention to her own body before Hive, and then since him, since Lincoln, she’d been hanging everything physically wrong with her on grief…but now that she looks back on the weeks behind her, this is the one thing that would make sense of everything.

The last thing she was expecting to discover in these final days.

May doesn’t react to her sudden confession, doesn’t even look in her direction, just purses her lips and nods once.

“How many weeks, do you think…” she asks quietly, and Daisy bites her lip, looking back at the waterfall in front of them.

“It has to be a couple months at least, and that means…May, I was possessed,” she says, the horror rising up so suddenly it nearly chokes her. “I was swayed, I was pouring out my blood for a monster who was in my mind and he never said anything…”
“Even if Hive had known, I’m sure he wouldn’t have told you,” May cuts her off, still not facing her. “What good would that have done him?”

“But May, what if Hive…what if I really am pregnant and what if the baby…” Her throat abruptly closes, and she presses a fist to her mouth, trying not to lose herself to panic completely. Finally, she feels May’s arms come gently around her.

“She’ll be fine, Daisy,” May says soundly in her ear, holding her close. “She’ll be fine.”

Daisy sucks in a shaky breath, turning within May’s grip to look at her.

“She?”

May doesn’t look away, just smiles sadly.

“She’ll be fine,” she repeats quietly.

“You knew,” Daisy breathes, her heart breaking for a whole new reason.

Now May does look away, though she doesn’t let go of her. “I knew.”

“How could you not tell me?” Daisy exhales, frustration elbowing panic out of the way for just a moment.

“Things happen the way they happen,” May says, looking over at her again. “You needed to make your own decisions without the burden of the future.”

The breath in her lungs comes out in a shudder as Daisy ducks her head, wrapping her arms around herself and collapsing into the woman beside her.

“I can’t be someone’s mom, May,” she choking out, tears threatening to spill out if she loosens her control even a little bit. “I don’t have the first clue how to parent. And no kid deserves a mess like me for a mom.”

“No parent has all the answers, no parent thinks they’re going to be good enough,” May assures her, smoothing one hand over her back. “And if anyone does think so, they’re proven wrong fast.”

“But…” Daisy gasps out, giving voice to all the panicked thoughts swirling in her mind, “you’re not supposed to do this alone. You’re supposed to have your partner, and your mom, or his mom there to help you…and I’m not even going to have…”

She trails off, but they both know what she was going to say.

“The team will be there for you as much as you let them,” May says softly, holding her tighter. “You’re not alone, and you never will be, as long as you don’t isolate yourself like I did all those years. And even then, Coulson’s too faithful of a friend to ever give up on someone he cares about.”

“I can’t do this May,” she repeats, her voice crumbling, “I can’t…”

“But you will, Daisy,” May murmurs, holding her tighter. “I know you’re going to be a great mom. And as for having another mother around, I’m sure that my mom would love to help…”

Melinda:
That evening, they end up on the west side of the island, settled on a quiet beach to watch the sun sink into the sea before driving back to their hotel. Daisy has pulled herself together well enough throughout the past few hours, but with one elephant finally acknowledged, the girl now seems bold enough to poke at Melinda’s.

“Are you afraid?” she says suddenly, staring out at the ocean ahead of them.

Her feelings about what’s coming next week are not something Melinda has let herself acknowledge yet, but she lets herself consider it for a moment before answering.

“Of dying? A little. Mostly because I don’t really know what to expect.”

She hasn’t subscribed to any faith throughout her life; she’s never really given much thought to an afterlife or a judgement waiting for her on the other side. Now, it feels far too late to form an opinion, especially when her curtain call is only days away now.

Throughout her life, she had been comforted by visits of her future self, knowing that she still had years ahead, whatever they may be. Now, for the first time, her future is a blank page. She knows what will happen up to a certain moment, and after that, she will be as clueless as everyone else is about their future.

“Do you know how it’s going to happen?” Daisy asks quietly, still not looking at her.

“Mostly,” she says, hoping Daisy doesn’t ask her to elaborate.

“Would you do anything differently?”

That answer is easier.

“No.”

They’re both quiet for a handful of minutes as the sun inches closer to the horizon, and Melinda lets herself acknowledge the fact that this will be the last time she sees a sunset like this.

“How much time do we have left?” Daisy’s voice is soft, but Melinda can still hear the undercurrent of pain in the question. She’s deliberately avoided this topic because she didn’t want Daisy to be watching the clock throughout their time together, but there’s little point in dodging the question now.

“We should probably head back tomorrow,” Melinda says as the orange ball of fire barely touches the sea.

“If you know when it’s going to happen…” Daisy whispers next, “then promise me, May, that you won’t be alone.”

Melinda closes her eyes and sighs.

“I don’t want anyone to have to remember that.”

“May,” Daisy repeats, and Melinda looks over when she feels the weight of her stare. “Let us decide what we do and don’t want to suffer,” the girl whispers. “Promise me you won’t be alone.”

Melinda holds her gaze, then reaches over and gently grips her hand. “I promise.”

Daisy goes quiet then, and Melinda takes her in—the kid that she’d never wanted on their Bus, now a seasoned agent, the girl now a woman who’s survived more than Melinda could ever imagine, now
lit up gold without and within and burning brighter than the sun.

“Let’s take a picture,” Melinda suggests suddenly, realizing that they still haven’t taken the photo that will hang on her mother’s fridge one day. They both sit up slightly and lean closer to one another as Daisy pulls out her phone and holds it up for a selfie. The shutter closes, and for some reason Melinda is glad that neither of their smiles hide the sadness in both of their eyes. By the time she lowers the phone, the sun has nearly fallen into the sea.

“It wasn’t enough time,” Daisy whispers as they watch it disappear completely.

“No, it wasn’t,” Melinda agrees, not moving away from the press of Daisy’s side against hers.

No amount of time would have been.

No amount of time could ever be.

Daisy:

Jet lag has worn off enough that they’re both awake long after sunset that night, but it’s obvious that they’re both wanting to put off the day’s end as long as possible. Their bags are partly packed, they’ve both showered the last of the sand off their skin, but they’re both still out on the balcony, stretched out beside each other on the padded lounge chair that seems built for three. The cushion is still warm from a day of sun, and the unseen ocean roars in the distance while the stars above them crowd out the blackness.

“You know, the first time I met you, we were under stars too,” Daisy says, remembering the hazy dream of a time traveler finding her on a back porch and reading her a book.

Beside her, May smiles. “You’re a little bigger now than you were then.”

“Older and wiser, I hope,” Daisy says.

“Stronger, too.”

There’s a moment of silence as Daisy puts a cautious hand on her lower abdomen, wondering how long it will be until she’s the one reading a story to a child.

“Did you mean what you said about your mom?” she whispers, remembering Lian’s admonition to call if she needed anything and realizing that May could have told her mother about Daisy’s future already.

“Wanting to help?” May asks, glancing over at her. “Definitely. I know she can be intimidating, but don’t ever feel afraid to ask her for help. She’s the one person outside of SHIELD that I’ve always known I could count on.”

Daisy sighs, pulling her hand from her stomach and tucking it behind her head.

“I still can’t really fit my head around the idea that I could be someone’s mom. It wasn’t a part of my future I ever really imagined. I mean, when I was little I used to keep a list of things good parents did and things bad parents did, but that was the closest I got.”

Not all of the foster mothers she’d experienced were bad ones. But there were enough on both sides that there was plenty of material for each list.
Feeling brave, Daisy reaches over and slips her hand into May’s.

“The only ‘plus one’ I ever imagined in my future was you.”

May is quiet after that, but she doesn’t pull her hand away.

“When I was a kid who still hadn’t met you and things were a little simpler,” Daisy goes on, “I used to try to imagine what our life together in the future would be like. Where we lived, what we did…I never in a million years could have come up with the story we ended up having.”

Beside her, May sighs sadly. “I wish it had been a happier one.”

It’s so like May, to focus on the parts of their time together that weren’t happy, the parts she can’t seem to forgive herself for, that it shouldn’t be surprising she’s labelled their story a tragedy. But Daisy is tired of hearing that lie, so she sits up, drawing May up with her and turning fully on the chair to face the woman.

“Melinda May, I don’t know how many different ways I have to tell you that I forgive you before you’ll believe it, but May, please hear me—I do. I forgive you for your absence when I just wanted you to stay, I forgive you for the hard things you did to protect people you care about, I forgive you for leaving and all the ways you’ve done it…I forgive you, and still I love you.”

May won’t look at her now. “After everything I’ve put you through?”

“And you’ve gotten me through.”

Daisy finally pulls her hand out of May’s only so she can reach up and cradle the woman’s face in both hands. She waits until May raises her eyes again before she takes a deep breath and tries to say those words in any way she hasn’t said them yet.

“I love you. I’ve loved you my whole life, maybe in every way one person can love another, and I don’t have any doubt that I’ll love you for the rest of it, no matter what happens. I love you, and I need you to stop thinking you’ll talk me out of it with just enough time. You did your best, but you’ve never changed my mind. You’re the best person I’ve ever known, and I would still happily spend the rest of my life with you. I don’t care if it’s five days or fifty years—any time we have left where we’re both breathing, I want to spend with you.”

She doesn’t have to come up with any more ways after that, because May suddenly leans in and kisses her.

It’s not at all half-hearted, but even as she holds on tight and kisses May back, she can tell that there is something uncertain in it, some part of May that is still trying to hold herself back, something she still hasn’t let go of yet.

When May does finally pull away, Daisy sees pain beneath the stars in her eyes and tears clinging stubbornly to her lashes.

“You deserve every happiness your future has for you,” May says, hanging her hands from Daisy’s arms and closing her eyes. “I don’t want you to be chained to the past. I want you to heal. And grow. And live your life, and be happy.”

“You’re the happiness I’ve always wanted,” Daisy says firmly. “You’re the happiness I want.”
“But I can’t stay.”

The words are a whisper, but Daisy can still hear that this, to May, is the one thing that negates everything else.

*She doesn’t want to break your heart again.*

“I know,” Daisy admits, smoothing her hands over May’s face. “But I’ve spent enough time loving you in your absence that I’m pretty sure I’ll love you for the rest of my life, no matter where you are.”

The tears do spill down May’s cheeks then, and Daisy thumbs them away, drawing May’s head down to cradle her against her heart. May’s arms come around her waist, holding her without holding on, and she lets out a shuddering breath against Daisy’s skin.

“I don’t deserve you.”

Daisy sighs and kisses the top of May’s head.

“Well, I love you, too.”

They stay like that for awhile, the waves crashing below them and the stars looking on form above, egging Daisy to ask the question that’s been hesitating on her tongue for too long.

“May, if we had more time…would you have wanted to stay together? If we’d had a different life…would you have married me if I asked?”

May doesn’t answer for a long moment, but then she abruptly pulls away.

“Stay here,” she tells Daisy as she gets quickly to her feet and disappears back into their room, leaving her confused and nervous on the balcony. She’s gone less than half a minute, returning to Daisy’s side something small and black clutched in one hand.

It’s a ring box.

“I had this made back when we were still together,” May says, looking down at the object in her hands as she says it. “I hid it up in Coulson’s office so you wouldn’t find it before I gave it to you that Christmas.”

May opens the box and turns it to show Daisy what’s inside—a ring of silver metal that glints in the starlight, a thin, asymmetrical open band with one end set with a small, shimmering white stone. There’s a slight taper to the metal of the band, its delicate tail ending beneath the widest part where the stone sits.

“I brought this on our trip because I wanted you to have it, one way or another…” May says as Daisy looks up at her, eyes wide with wonder. “I just hadn’t figured out what to say when I gave it to you…”

May slowly pulls the ring out of the box and holds it out to Daisy, who takes it with trembling hands and suddenly realizes what the shape is supposed to be.

It’s a comet.

“I do love you Daisy,” May says then with a slight quiver in her voice, and Daisy looks up at her, wide-eyed. “I want you to have every good thing this world can give you. I want you to have a
family, and I want you to have every good thing that’s mine. I know throughout your life I never
gave you a name for what we would one day be to each other, because there never was a word that
felt like enough. But if you want this—if this is really what you want—then with the time we have
left, why don’t we do something neither of us knew was coming—let’s give it a name.”

May takes Daisy’s hands in her own, then slides out of the chair and down onto one knee.

“Marry me, Daisy,” she whispers, then quickly amends it to a question. “Will you marry me?”

Daisy takes a breath, one that feels like her first in days, and answers with the widest smile of her
life.

“Yes, of course I will!”

May lets out a shaking breath as she grins too, a relieved laugh shuddering out of her as she takes the
ring from Daisy to slip it onto her finger. As she looks up smiling, Daisy grabs her into a kiss, then
hauls May up off the ground until she is on the chair again and in her arms. It’s the first kiss in years
that has felt completely free, unimpeded by doubt or fear, uncertainty or mistrust. For the first time in
days, the clock running in the background has gone quiet, but Daisy doesn’t want there to be any
understanding.

“Can we really do this?” she gasps as she breaks away for a moment, staring hopefully at May in the
starlight. “Can we make this official and get for-real married tomorrow?”

May smiles, nodding. “If you’re sure, and if you’re not picky, we could stop in Vegas on our way
back tomorrow.”

Daisy grins. “I’ve heard you like Vegas,” she murmurs as May smiles, still looking a little amazed
herself.

“We’ll do it,” she promises, nodding again solemnly. “First thing tomorrow, we’ll fly there and do
this. I’m sorry we don’t have time for a honeymoon, though.”

Daisy shakes her head and shrugs, still smiling. “This felt a lot like one to me.”

“We do everything out of order,” May murmurs, shaking her head as she leans into Daisy, her hands
sliding around Daisy’s middle and up her back.

“It’s our thing,” Daisy says, her eyes falling shut as May’s hands slide into her hair.

“Well, then let’s have a wedding night while we’ve got time,” May whispers against her neck, and
Daisy opens eyes and grins as May pulls her to her feet.

Before they go back inside though, Daisy draws May into a slow, deliberate kiss under the stars for
all the universe to see.

“I love you,” she breathes, holding onto her tightly enough that she can feel May’s heartbeat against
her own.

May holds back just as tightly, as certain as gravity.

“God, I love you, too.”
Leaving, Two

Chapter Summary

Finale, III

Chapter Notes

First section would be rated M

May 22, 2011—Skye is 22, May is 46

She has no idea what time it is when she jolts awake to the sound of a thud not far from her head, her heart immediately kickstarting her flight-or-fight response. The space around her is nearly pitch black, and Skye quickly gropes for the rechargeable flashlight she had clicked off before lying down for the night. Rain is thudding on the roof of the car, but she’s fairly certain it wasn’t thunder that just woke her…

The thudding on the door comes again.

“Skye!” a woman’s voice comes from the other side. “Come on! Let me in!”

May.

She doesn’t remember to be smart and check through the window before unlocking the side door and sliding it open—and a girl in her living situation has to be smart—but it’s only her time traveler standing in the dark outside of the car, arms wrapped around herself and soaked with rain.

“Jesus, May,” Skye breathes, moving aside as May practically leaps into the van as soon as the door is open wide enough. She quickly slides the door shut again and locks it before grabbing the blanket off her air mattress and throwing it over the naked woman. “How long were you out there?”

“Less than a minute,” May says, shivering as she wraps the blanket tightly around herself. “You didn’t warn me it would be raining on this visit.”

“You didn’t warn me you’d be showing up at— “ Skye checks the tiny analog alarm clock on the sideboard—“2:45 in the morning.”

“Two years too late to correct that,” May mutters, pulling up a corner of the blanket to rub some of the rain out of her hair.

Skye reaches up and flicks on the interior light, deciding she can suffer to use a little bit of the car’s battery as long as May’s here. She has curtains pulled over most of the windows of her new home on wheels, but she’s still able to see the LA skyline through the rain out the windshield.

“How long ago did you get here?”
“About a month ago,” Skye says, smiling as May faces her again. “Van was easy lodging on the road, and since I haven’t found work yet, it’s cheaper to just stay here.”

May nods, looking around the small space, something wistful in her gaze. “You like it so far?”

Skye grins, looking around her home proudly. “Definitely—I’ve never had my own place before. And I get around the no-bathroom situation by limiting my fluid intake after 9pm and making sure I know the closest public toilet at all times.”

“Do you feel safe?” May asks seriously. “You’re not the only one camping out up here you know—I saw a few other vehicles.”

Skye shrugs. “Safe enough,” she answers, then realizes something odd. “How did you even know this van was mine?”

May shrugs within the blanket. “I’ve seen it before.”

Automatically, Skye’s ears prick up. “Really?” she says. “In the future?”

At first, May doesn’t answer, just looks around the van again with something like nostalgia visible in her expression. When her gaze lands on Skye again, there’s so much tenderness in May’s eyes that Skye’s heart feels like it might burst.

“You’ve grown up so much,” May says, gazing at her with a soft smile, one that makes Skye bold enough to tumble closer to wrap her arms around May’s middle, squeezing her inside the blanket.

“I’ve missed you,” she says, thinking back to the last visit, back when she was still in Austin with Miles, and how differently that one had gone. “Can’t believe it’s already been nine months since last time.”

May rests her hand on the crown of Skye’s head, and Skye hears her take a deep breath.

“The next wait is going to be a little longer.”

Skye draws back so she can sit up and face her, looking at May quizzically.

“How much longer?” she asks. “When’s the next visit?”

May hesitates, slipping one hand out of the blanket and taking Skye’s hand gently.

“Skye…” she says slowly, looking down at their joined hands. “This is the last one.”

Skye blinks, confused. “What do you mean?”

May raises her head then, the tenderness and nostalgia still written all over her face, and she smiles gently. “The next time we see each other, Skye, it’s going to be my present day. I’m not going to recognize you, because I will have never met you before. And you, finally, are going to be the one who knows everything that I wish I knew about the future.”

Skye looks away, absorbing this for a moment, her heart ballooning with anticipation already.

“Is that day…is it a long way off?” she asks eagerly.

May shakes her head. “I won’t tell you exactly when, but…you’ll have to wait a couple of years.”

*Years?*
Hearing this brings a gut-punch of disappointment, but Skye can’t pretend to not be eager for anything else May will tell her.

“Are we in another place?” she asks, glancing at the L.A. skyline through the rain-drenched windshield.

May looks around the van again. “Not exactly.”

Skye nods.

Note

“I’ve been looking for you, you know,” Skye says, nodding in the direction of her laptop, tucked out of sight beneath the driver’s seat. “And for my birth parents. But mostly for you.”

May squeezes her hand gently, smiling downwards. “I know.”

“Want to make the search a little shorter?” Skye teases. “You could always tell me your full name.”

“Next time,” May says with a smile.

Next time... I’ll get to know everything.

Skye thinks back through the visits, beginning with a back porch and sitting across the country, milemarkers over the years drawing them ever towards one another.

So that we could become...what? She looks down at their joined hands, feeling the tug of longing that is so familiar now it may as well be the warp through which her days have woven. Where is all this meant to lead?

Feeling guilty, Skye pulls away before she can betray herself.

“If this is really the last visit, we should do something special,” she says, unfolding from her place on the air mattress and crawling towards the back of the van where she keeps her basket of food and drinks. When she pulls two glass bottles out and turns around, May raises an eyebrow.

“Aren’t there laws about open containers of alcohol in cars?” she says as Skye squirms back to the other side of the mattress, next to May.

“Probably. Wine or whisky?” she asks, holding them both out to May, who touches the wine bottle with one finger. Smirking, Skye sets the liquor aside.

“I should warn you that it’s cheap,” she says as she fills two paper cups with wine and carefully offers one to May. The woman slips an arm completely out of the blanket to take the drink, exposing one bare shoulder and reminding Skye that she hasn’t yet offered May any clothes…

“To seventeen years of visits,” May says, holding her cup out towards Skye for a toast. Skye touches her cup gently to May’s, a soundless clink.

“To the best of times,” she says, and takes a sip.

“But this isn’t, you know,” May says as Skye lowers her cup and looks at her quizzically. May hasn’t sipped her wine yet and is staring seriously at her in the gold light.

“Don’t think of it that way,” she goes on, holding Skye’s gaze. “This, tonight, this isn’t the end of something good. When you and I meet again, that’s when everything… begins.”
“For you,” Skye reminds her pointedly, but May smiles.

“For us,” she corrects quietly.

“Us?” Skye repeats, heart stumbling slightly at this possible hint.

May’s smile grows, but then she lowers her head to drink her cup down and leans over to set it on the floor behind her. As she straightens, she lets the blanket fall down her other arm, puddling at her waist. Skye’s heart practically shudders and she starts to look away but May is just leaning towards her, a knowing look in her eyes…

“Us,” she repeats, a whisper against Skye’s lips.

And then their lips touch, and time stops.

Skye needs only a millisecond to respond before her hands come up to clasp May’s face, terrified that May might suddenly change her mind and wanting this to last as long as possible. May isn’t pulling away though, is actually pressing closer, shifting onto her knees and sliding her arms around Skye, who moves to wrap her arms around May’s shoulders until they both overbalance and tumble backwards onto her air mattress with a whump. Skye’s brain isn’t forming a single thought more coherent than oh my god, and that’s playing on a loop as the kiss goes on and on...

“Are you serious?” she eventually gasps out as May’s body presses fully against hers while the woman’s lips trail across her cheek towards her ear. “We’re really…we’re this?”

“We’re a lot more than this,” May whispers, pulling back enough to look her in the eye. “But we’re this too.”

Still disbelieving, Skye kisses her again eagerly, wanting to touch everything, wanting May’s hands everywhere…

“Why couldn’t you tell me sooner?” she whispers the next time she pauses for a breath. “After all this time…”

“You told me this was the way it happened,” May says with a small shrug.

“Oh, I see, so this is my fault?” Skye says with a grin, pulling May in and kissing her again, running her hands down her bare sides…

She abruptly finds her wrists caught and pinned to the air mattress beside her head, May hovering over her with a gleam in her eye and a smug smile on her lips.

“Let me make it up to you?” the woman offers, one knee nudging Skye’s legs apart.

“Go for it,” Skye responds with a grin, heart singing in her chest and hoping it means what it sounds like...

Fortunately, it does.

She wants to watch everything May is doing, but after a certain point, she can’t keep her eyes open. She’s fooled around with girls before, so the activities themselves are hardly new, but there is something fantastically intentional about every action of May’s—every caress, every kiss…May spends a lot of time kissing a certain place on her stomach, a certain spot on her arm… she touches her in ways that make Skye shudder, sucks in places that make her writhe…
By the time May has made her way between her legs, Skye is inches from the edge already. It doesn’t take long for her to throw her head back and gasp out May’s name, but the woman keeps at her, pushing her over the edge a second time before Skye manages to weakly tug her back up her body.

“Jesus,” she whispers as May kisses her way up Skye’s chest again. “I don’t think I can even move.”

“That’s what I like to hear,” May says, and Skye can feel her smiling against her shoulder.

“But I want to…I want…”

“Next time,” May promises, meeting her eyes with a smile.

“Yeah, I’m not waiting two years,” Skye says, abruptly rolling them both over until she’s topping May, who laughs in surprise.

She stops though as soon as Skye presses her down into the mattress and starts taking her apart.

Once they’re both lying still again, Skye safely encased in May’s arms and listening to her heartbeat gradually slowing again beneath her ribs, she attempts to count the scars that she can see across May’s newly-exposed body. She’s spent most of the last ten visits averting her eyes while May got dressed, but now, suddenly, nothing is off-limits. There’s a straight gash on May’s side that looks barely healed-over, not far from a more jagged line above her hipbone that looks much older. There’s a puncture wound on one forearm that looks relatively fresh, another one on her opposite bicep that is more faded…

“Let me see the List,” May says suddenly, startling Skye a little. She sits up quickly though and digs through her books for it, extracting the worn piece of paper from the notebook where she had it tucked between the pages.

May sits up too without covering up with the blanket, smoothing the List over her thigh and grabbing a pen off the floor. Skye crowds close again to watch as May scribbles something on the very bottom of the paper in characters that Skye can’t read, then folds it up again and hands it back to her.

“Make sure you give this to me when we meet again,” May practically orders her. “I’ll need to memorize it so that I can tell you these days in my future.”

The thought of their next meeting being the first one for May, of it being the beginning of their relationship, makes anticipation bubble up in Skye’s chest again, and she leans in to wrap her arms around May again.

“I don’t want to wait two years for this,” she says, closing her eyes and breathing in May’s scent, storing the memory for the long wait ahead.

May runs a gentle hand through her hair. “It’s two years until we meet, but even after that…” She trails off, then sighs before continuing. “You’ll have to be patient with me, Skye. When you see me next, I won’t know your name, or our history, or your feelings for me. It will be a rough start for both of us, and really, you may not like the pErwin that I am in the beginning. But hold on to this. Hold onto these memories of the me you will know.”

“Will I tell you who I am?”

May nods. “You’ll say that I visited you while you were growing up. But you won’t tell me about this—our future together. You need to give me time to feel the same, time to figure it out for myself. Please Skye, go easy on me. I tried to do the same for you.”
Skye lifts her head, smoothing a hand over May’s cheek. “I spend my whole life waiting for you,” she says, and May’s eyes soften with compassion.

“I know. I wish it were simpler.” May leans in and kisses her lips. “I wish a lot of things.”

Skye presses in for another kiss, as long as they’re being given so freely, indulging one dream before remembering the other.

“You’ve told me before you’ll find me someday,” she says, pulling away and looking May in the eye, “but…am I ever going to find my parents, May? Is there even anything to find?”

May looks at her like her heart is breaking, reaching up to gently slip her hand around the back of Skye’s neck.

“Don’t stop looking,” the woman says, holding her gaze meaningfully. “Never stop.”

Skye nods and thinks she understands.

May suddenly leans in and kisses her urgently. “I’m going,” she whispers as she pulls back.

Skye has always tried not to hold on, tried not to feel the moment that May leaves, but this time, she can’t help but surge forward and cling to May until the very last second…

“I love you,” she whispers, not caring if May says it back but still hoping she will. “I love you…”

The last thing she hears before the sound of May slipping away is the beating of her heart and a single word on a final exhale.

“Daisy…”

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**May 9, 2016—Melinda is 46, Daisy is 27**

She reappears on the floor beside the dresser.

She’d been asleep when she disappeared, but the lamp on the nightstand is now on, and Daisy is sitting up in the bed, both hands clutching fistfuls of sheet.

“Thank god,” she exhales as soon as Melinda appears, immediately clambering out of bed and rushing to her side. Melinda attempts to get to her feet, but Daisy is already there and practically lifts her off the ground by her elbows before hauling her into a hug.

“I was afraid…” Daisy says over her shoulder, holding her tightly enough that Melinda can feel her trembling.

*I was afraid that this was it…*

She squeezes Daisy tightly in return, feeling the world steadying.

“Not yet. And remember, I always come back,” she reminds her.

Daisy pulls back just enough to kiss her, then guides her gently back to bed.

“Where did you go?” she whispers as they climb beneath the covers together again.
Melinda reaches over for their nightstand and pulls the List out of the drawer.

“To you.”

She feels Daisy watching as she writes the last date on the piece of paper that has made it through decades, the one that has survived as much as they have, the clock that counted down to their first meeting and to the end of the traveling. Melinda smooths her thumb over the line of characters at the bottom, the ones she just wrote, the ones she wrote five years ago…

“Now we’re even,” she says quietly, looking up at Daisy and holding out the List to her.

The girl has tears in her eyes as she takes it and looks at the completed columns, memories they now finally share.

“The universe saved the best for last,” Daisy says, a few tears slipping down her cheeks as she smiles up at her.

Melinda lies back on the pillows and holds out an arm for Daisy, who settles willingly against her chest beneath it, the List still held in one hand.

“Maybe,” Melinda agrees, running a hand through Daisy’s hair, so much shorter than that of the girl that she was just holding. “But I think the universe knew this was when I would be able to do it right.”

To set their future in motion.

To say goodbye with her whole heart.

“Remember how you said that we might peak when the List ran out?” Daisy asks, and Melinda smiles.

“What do you call this?” she says, touching the ring on the girl’s left hand.

Daisy smiles against her skin, then rocks up on one elbow and leans down to kiss her. One hand cradles Melinda’s cheek, and she can feel the cool line of a ring against her skin.

“I love you,” Daisy whispers against her lips.

There is no reason to withhold those words now, so Melinda says them twice.

“I love you too,” she whispers, drawing Daisy against her heart. “I love you, too.”

May 9-14, 2016

Daisy:

For the briefest amount of time, it’s Indian summer.

After everything they’ve been through over the years, she didn’t actually think that putting things on paper would change much about her relationship with May, and maybe, in some senses, it hasn’t. They had got back to base that same night after stopping in Vegas and moved back into their old room together, reoccupying their shared space and expanding to fit their lives together again. The next morning, she had woken up when May did and they had gone through a morning workout together just like before.
When Jemma saw them at breakfast though and immediately noticed the ring on Daisy’s finger, it was like a switch flipped in Daisy’s brain.

*That’s my wife,* she thought disbelievingly as she watched May receive an enthusiastic hug from Jemma, grinning at May’s helpless expression. *That’s my wife.*

It didn’t take long for the news to spread through the whole base, and the two of them had fielded congratulations from nearly every agent on staff, some of whom Daisy had never even spoken to before. Jemma has a million questions for her and Coulson seems to have a few for May, and some of the team try to insist on throwing them a party that evening, which they manage to beg off in favor of a deferred party at the end of the week, one that’s ostensibly just for everyone to blow off a little steam after the hell of the past month.

Daisy can’t bring herself to ask if that means May will still be here that night—she knows they must be running out of time, but she also has a feeling May won’t tell her the moment until it’s on them. She knows that May wanted to come back to say goodbye to people here, and that must mean that this is where she wants to be at the end.

She’s of course constantly afraid to let May out of her sight, but Daisy tries to trust the woman’s promise that May will tell her when it’s time to... when it’s time. She is still watching May as closely as possible throughout their days back at the base, but her S.O. is just going on like everything is normal. Working out in the morning, training the specialist teams after, working upstairs with Coulson, checking in on everyone.

Being the agent she’s always been, to the very end.

At night, the two of them talk about everything except the obvious in between kisses and everything else. One evening, Daisy walks into the room to find May cleaning up a splash of blood out of the carpet, something she seems as confused about as Daisy, but after insisting on thoroughly checking each other for wounds, they forget all about it. Daisy maps anew every inch of May’s skin and tries not to think about the fact that all the scars are there now, all the ones Daisy remembers from their first time together, the ones that were absent on the second time. The story may not be over, but she knows they’re in the final pages.

And she can feel in the urgency of May’s touch one night that they may be nearing the last one.

They’re lying together that night with May sprawled between Daisy’s legs and her ear pressed intentionally against Daisy’s bare lower belly while Daisy drags her fingers gently through May’s hair. She can guess what May’s thinking, another thing they’re still having trouble talking about.

“So you met her?” Daisy says towards the top of May’s head, and her wife looks up at her with a smile.

“Yeah,” she says, kissing Daisy’s stomach just south of her bullet scars. “She’s going to be incredible. I’m already smitten.”

Daisy wants to ask all the questions about the future—*What will I name her? Where did you see her? Does she look like me? What is she like?*—but she also doesn’t want May to have to lie by omission if Daisy asks anything too specific. Still, she has to know...

“Will I see you again? In the future? Is she with me when you meet her?”

It’s a question she’s never wanted to ask, but it’s one of the only things that could make this parting easier.
May is quiet for a while, her fingers sliding gently over the old scars on Daisy’s thigh.

“We’ll speak again,” she eventually whispers. “And I could be there more than I know—the story’s not over yet.”

This is all Daisy can ask for, and she tugs at May gently until the woman moves up to lie along her body.

_Not over yet_, Daisy repeats to herself, wrapping her arms around the love of her life and holding on tight. _Not yet._

**May 15-16, 2016**

**Melinda:**

She’s been trying not to sleep as the day has gotten closer, and she realizes that was her mistake. It won’t be a nightmare that takes her sometime else—if she’s this unsteady in her present, then most likely she’ll just slip away.

But first, there’s going to be a party.

The air is a little awkward at first as they all trek up to the roof, everyone carrying food or drinks or blankets or tables. There hasn’t been much to laugh about for the past few months, and something about this feels a little irreverent, but May reminds herself that if nothing else, there’s a wedding to celebrate.

Daisy is DJ-ing from her laptop with the assistance of a small set of Bluetooth speakers, since Coulson warned her not to get their top-secret base a noise ordinance. He also warns them not to bring up any flood lights, so the party is lit by rows of candles in repurposed containers along the edge of the roof and on all the tables. Blankets are spread out over the rough shingles, bottles are opened and passed around, pizzas and snacks are set out and devoured inside an hour. It’s a break they all need, but it’s also painfully obvious how foreign things like parties have become for this team that’s been put through hell.

Mack is playing bartender for most of the evening, and May smiles at him as he mixes Daisy’s drink.

“Thanks for keeping this one alive while I was away,” she says with a nod at Daisy, who rolls her eyes.

“He gets paid to be the responsible one,” she says. “Not exactly the life of the party at team meetings.”

“You know I’m your better half,” Mack says with a wink in May’s direction.

“I’m glad you stuck around,” she says sincerely. He is, understandably, confused by her tone, but he nods politely as he passes Daisy her cup.

“Well, I’m glad we all made it this far,” he says, and May nods, slipping her hand into Daisy’s as the girl returns to her side.

“You would make a great Director, you know,” May adds, and at that, Mack smiles, looking at Daisy.
“How much has she had to drink?” he says, nudging May gently with his elbow.

“Not enough,” Daisy says, looking into May’s cup. “Come on May, they’re setting up beer pong over there.” She leads the way, tugging May after her.

“Keep Daisy out of trouble,” May says to Mack before she’s too far away. “And keep Coulson in line.”

She walks away before he can ask her what she means.

Daisy doesn’t leave her side much, but on one of the moments she does, Melinda moves beside Coulson, where he stands at the edge of the roof.

“You’re going to get an email tomorrow with some information,” she says quietly, not able to look at him and nervously swishing the water in her cup. “Some people I’ll need you to contact…”

She can feel the horror in his gaze as he looks over at her, understanding.

“May, you’re not…”

“Promise me you won’t give up on Daisy,” she whispers, slipping one hand down his arm to pull gently at his shirtcuff. “Just like you never gave up on me.”

He moves his good hand to briefly clasp hers.

“I promise. Are you…are you ready?” he whispers, and May looks away.

“No…” she says softly, “but I’m out of time.”

“You know I love you, right Melinda?”

She squeezes his hand hard.

“I love you too, Phil.”

Daisy:

She wanted to be wrong, but she suspected when she saw the look on Coulson’s face when May had pulled him to the side to talk to him. Once she saw the same look on Jemma’s face when May spoke quietly to her a little while later, the way she ducked her head to wipe away tears, Daisy had known for sure.

She’d asked May to tell her when it was time, but now, she sees, she doesn’t have to.

The sun has been down for hours and most of the partygoers have drifted back downstairs when May tugs her over to sit down on one of the blankets that had been brought up and spread over the gravel shingles, and Daisy grips her hand tightly.

“Why did you let us plan this party for tonight?” she whispers without prelude, crowding close. May looks at her with heartbreak in her eyes and bites her lip, then pulls her hand from Daisy’s so that she can wrap her arm around her shoulders.

“I didn’t want you to be alone, either,” she whispers, drawing Daisy closer and kissing her temple.
She thought she was prepared for this, but she realizes now that she never could be.

“Please not yet,” Daisy whispers, panic displacing everything else in an instant. “I’m not ready…”

“I know,” May whispers against her hair, holding on tight. “I know, and I’m so sorry.”

Distantly, she hears feet approaching, then she feels Jemma’s hands, gentle against her back. When she manages to look up, she sees Coulson sitting beside May, Fitz standing over Jemma’s like a sentry.

“I wish I could stay longer,” May whispers, glancing around at all of them, tears in her eyes.

“May, please…” Daisy gasps, clinging to her with all the strength she has, and May presses a final kiss to her lips.

“I love you, Daisy, and I’m so sorry.”

August 27, 1989—May is 46 and 46, Daisy is 1

Melinda:

She sits up on cold, hard soil in a solid swath of night, an impossible expanse of stars over the insignificant village in front of her, a village already rampant with the chaos she saw here before. Scrambling to her feet, Melinda staggers towards the terror, but almost immediately she trips over a person, dead on the side of the road. She doesn’t have time to feel bad as she bends to strip the dead man’s shirt and pull it on, she can only think of the baby somewhere in here that she has to find before it’s too late…

People are running every which way as she races into the tiny clutch of houses, and there is still the sound of gunfire that Melinda can’t yet source…She looks for something familiar, something that looks like the part of this village she saw before…

An explosion just a few meters in front of her makes her stumble back and throw up her arms, blocking the light and heat as an ancient vehicle goes up in flames while debris rains down on the circumference and spreads the fire…

Onto a house.

Immediately, Melinda knows where she needs to go.

Through the gate she spots a rain barrel and quickly douses her shirt in it, then yanks a quilt off a laundry line and dunks it too in the water. No one is running out of or into the house except her as she breaks through the front door, the fire already licking down the sides of the house and catching on the haystack in the courtyard.

“Skye!” Melinda shouts, bursting into the house. “Daisy!”

No one answers her, but through the roar of the fire, she can hear a baby screaming.

She finds her in the next room, the screams coming from a bamboo cradle already half-engulfed in flames…

The ceiling is starting to fall in as she lunges through the doorway again with the baby protected
inside the wet blanket in her arms, and Melinda gets hit with a falling beam just before they burst out into the open air again. She tumbles to the ground, the blanket and baby slipping from her arms as she hurls herself into a roll, pulling up the shirt to help douse the flames that had caught on her hair…

Daisy is choking and coughing between her screams when Melinda scrambles back to her side, opening the blanket to quickly check her for injuries. She sees the burn across the baby’s foot, fresh and blistering, but she seems otherwise unhurt, and May does her best to be careful as she bundles the baby back up while flames spread across the courtyard…

Gunfire seems to come from all around her as she stumbles back out onto the road, staggering a safe distance from the burning house before pausing to huddle against a wall and let a coughing spell pass.

Inside the blanket, Daisy is coughing too, and Melinda opens it partway to make sure the tiny child is getting enough air. The dark-haired baby’s coughs are interspersed with pitiful cries, and Melinda holds the girl against her chest, watching for her Meimei to make her entrance.

“I’m sorry Daisy…I’m so sorry I didn’t get here sooner,” Melinda whispers once she’s caught her breath, holding the child against her and rocking her steadily. “I’m glad you won’t remember this, but look! This is actually us meeting for the first time. You’ll see me again in a few years, and we’ll be under stars then too, and you’ll be in a much safer place…”

Daisy is still crying, but her eyes are finally open, taking Melinda in, seeing her for the very first time…

“I know you won’t remember this,” Melinda repeats around her coughs, “and that’s okay. But just know that I already love you. I’m already proud of you. You’re already the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

Another explosion thunders through her bones, making Daisy immediately begin screaming again. Melinda is jolted back to their present, staggering back into the chaos of people running up and down the road, looking both directions for her past self before turning one way and locking eyes with…

Jiaying.

Melinda clutches Daisy to her chest, turns, and runs.

Her younger self is confused but compliant as Melinda drags her down the road out of sight, pulls Daisy from the blanket and thrusts her into her arms. She points her in the right direction, presses a last kiss to Daisy’s head, then touches her younger self on the cheek, making sure she understands what’s about to happen.

“Bye, Meimei,” she whispers before turning and running in the other direction, back into the view of the road.

Eleven steps later, something cold and sharp strikes her in the side, ripping through her flesh, and Melinda falls. She clutches at her abdomen and feels blood gushing out, knowing immediately that it’s too much…

Someone catches up to her, falling to the ground beside her and shoving Melinda onto her back, grabbing at the blanket in her arms and finding it empty…

A hand seizes her throat, and Melinda barely opens her eyes to see the girl’s mother glaring down at her.
“Wǒ de nǚér zài nǎ er?” Jiaying demands, her hand tightening until Melinda can barely breathe.

Where is my daughter?

Melinda can only get out one word, and she says it in English.

“Safe.”

Jiaying’s eyes narrow, and her other hand moves to Melinda’s neck. Immediately, the suffocating, crippling feeling that she felt the last time she came face to face with this woman crashes on her like a wave, and Melinda realizes what’s about to happen only a millisecond before it does…

**Daisy:**

May is gone for six agonizing minutes. As the seconds tick by, Jemma holds her steadily, and Coulson grips her hand.

It’s just another occasion of Daisy waiting for her, but it’s not in a context she ever wanted to experience.

When May suddenly reappears, it’s only for a second, only long enough to gasp and leave a smear of blood on the blanket before disappearing again…

**Melinda:**

The Playground.

Andrew’s home.

The Playground.

Academy classroom.

Playground.

Hawk Mountain.

Playground—Daisy…

A backyard I’ve seen before.

Playground—Daisy…

Triskellion.

Daisy…

**Daisy:**

She keeps trying to catch her, to hold onto her, to help her stay, but as soon as her hands touch
May’s skin, the woman is gone again and Daisy’s grasping at air, remembering the last time she saw May time-travel like this and the horrible reason why…

**Melinda:**

*Mom’s place.*

*Daisy…*

*A room that was mine…*

*Daisy…*

*Someplace dark…*

*Daisy…*

*Someplace bright…*

**Daisy:**

They’re waiting.

There were only seconds between May’s disappearances before, but now it’s been minutes, and every second ticking by is agony. They’re alone on the rooftop now, the four of them continuing in silent vigil, surrounded by the remains of the party and a slowly-drying bloodstain on the blanket between them.

It’s not until ten minutes have passed that Daisy lets herself speak.

“She must be reappearing somewhere else,” she says firmly, looking around at the others. “Fitz, go grab my laptop—let’s check the cameras. Make sure she’s not somewhere else in the base.”

She pulls up the camera feeds and checks every single one, then checks them all in the past few hours for good measure. Nothing. No trace.

Minutes turn into hours. Daisy can’t stop looking at her watch. Her laptop battery is getting low when Fitz offers to go back inside with Simmons and prep medical…just in case. Daisy nods, knowing they need her permission to go, understanding that they need to leave.

Coulson stays.

Night passes slowly. The candles burn down and smoke out one by one until it’s just the two of them and the stars watching and waiting. Daisy keeps her laptop open even after the battery dies, keeps her arms folded tightly over her knees, and waits…

Dawn is starting to creep up on the horizon when Coulson finally speaks.

“Daisy…”

She won’t hear it.
“She always comes back, Coulson.”

She can’t look at him, but she can feel the heartbreak radiating off him as he looks at her.

“Daisy…we should…”

He reaches out and touches her shoulder, and she nearly quakes him away.

“No!” she cries, flinching back, looking at him beseechingly. “Not until she comes back!”

“Daisy…” he repeats, like there’s nothing else to say.

“No! She’ll come back!” Daisy whimpers, feeling her composure crumbling. “She’ll come back!”

He moves towards her again, and she shoves him back, but when he tries a second time, she collapses against him completely.

“She’ll come back…” she repeats until she can’t speak anymore. “She has to come back…”

**Coulson:**

The email arrives before noon that day, just like she’d said.

There is a short note, straightforward as May had always been, kind words and good wishes, followed by final requests.

He hates being the one to carry them out, but he’s glad it doesn’t have to be Daisy.

He calls Lian first and tells her the news without telling her the details, then asks if she can tell May’s father or if she wants him to do it. Lian offers to make the call herself, which moves Phil down the list to calling a lawyer whose name he doesn’t recognize.

“She has a will with us,” the lawyer tells him over the phone when he gives her May’s personal information. “But the updated paperwork is still processing. Apparently she just got married?”

“Yes,” Phil answers painfully. “Let that go through first.”

_They weren’t even married a week…_

“I’ll need a death certificate to move forward with anything else,” the lawyer tells him, sounding cautious, and Phil sighs.

The next person he has to talk to is Simmons.

“We can’t issue a death certificate without a death,” Simmons says very quietly when he explains the situation. “We don’t have a body, ergo, we can’t pronounce her dead.”

“You and I both know there’s only one reason we don’t have a body,” Coulson says quietly, hating that she’s making him say it out loud. “Forge it if you have to.”

“That’s usually been Daisy’s department,” Simmons says quietly, making him look at her steadily, imploringly.

“I’ll get right on it,” Simmons says next, turning away.
He has to brief the team at large, but it’s just as hard to explain the circumstances when they know even less about May. He at first resolves not to tell them about the time travel, but when every agent had seen May at the party just last night, it becomes impossible to convince them without telling them everything. Eventually, he gives them the bare-bones story, not really caring if he’s believed or not, counting on the base’s rumor mill to fill in the gaps for everyone.

And then there’s her final request—Daisy.

The girl doesn’t leave her room that day or the next or the next, just like after Hive, just like after Lincoln. They’re all taking turns checking on her, but she isn’t speaking to anyone, so Phil isn’t exactly optimistic when he knocks on her door the next evening.

But he knows he has to try.

Daisy doesn’t say anything when he comes in, remaining hunched over her laptop, cross-legged on one side of her bed. There are two empty tissue boxes on the floor that tells him that’s not all she’s been doing for the past two days, but he can also see from the circles under her eyes that sleeping wasn’t one of those things.

“I’ve almost finished setting up this program,” she says as he goes to stand at her bedside, looking over her shoulder at her laptop screen. “Scans police records and hospital databases for any Jane Doe reports that match May’s description…”

He realizes what she’s doing—searching for a dead woman in the only way she knows how.

“Good idea,” is all he says, sitting down on the bed beside her. He just listens to her working for a while, glad for the moment to see her not immobile with grief, seeming almost like herself.

It’s a drywall dam though, and it’s only a matter of time before it disintegrates.

“Did she tell you how it was going to happen?” Daisy eventually asks suddenly, and he looks over at her, attempting his practiced blank expression.

“I know she knew,” Daisy goes on, eyes on her screen. “But she wouldn’t tell me the details. Did she tell you?”

Coulson knows silence gives away the answer, but May had made him promise not to say anything…

“It had something to do with my mother, didn’t it?” Daisy says, her voice sounding thin. “That’s the only other time I’ve seen May disappear like that. And she had burns on her skin…”

One of Daisy’s hands is on her own ankle, fingers sliding thoughtfully over a burn scar there…

Coulson looks down instead of responding.

*She doesn’t need you to tell her. But May’s request still stands.*

“I have something for you,” he says, offering her the thick parcel envelope he’d brought in with him. “This just arrived today. It was sent by May’s lawyer.”

He watches her open it, and a stack of envelopes spills out onto the duvet, each marked with a number.

“Letters,” Daisy says quietly, sliding them into numerical order. Surprisingly, she doesn’t start
ripping them open immediately, just sets them aside and pulls her laptop closer.

“I also came because I wanted to talk to you about a service…” Coulson begins.

“No,” Daisy interrupts. “Not right now.”

“Daisy…”

“Coulson…” she says, not looking at him, “I can’t even think like that right now. Not when we don’t know what happened to her. She could be anywhere,” the girl breathes, her voice slowly dissolving the longer she speaks. “She could be on her mother’s living room floor thirty years before her mom lived there. She could be buried under the rubble of the Triskellion. She could be on the Iliad, or in Bahrain, or anywhere she’s ever set foot in her life, any time years in either direction…how are we supposed to know that and just say ‘she’s gone’? How am I supposed to…”

She abruptly goes silent, pressing the heel of her hand against her eyes, and Coulson puts a gentle hand on her shoulder.

“We don’t have to accept it. We don’t have to be okay with it. But we have to find some way to live with what’s happened, so that someday we can move on.”

Daisy snuffles quietly behind her hand for a moment, then scrubs her face and turns back to her laptop. Sensing his dismissal, Coulson gets to his feet after sliding his hand comfortingly over her shoulder one more time.

“We can hold off on a service a little while longer,” he says. “But if you need to talk, if you need someone who knows what you’re going through—”

“Don’t act like you understand what this feels like for me,” Daisy bites out, her composure barely wired together. “It’s not the same…”

“It’s not a competition, Daisy,” Coulson says quietly as he turns to go. “We both lost her. We both hurt.”

Before he reaches the door, Daisy is off her bed and running to his arms, burying herself against his chest and holding on tightly.

“I’m sorry,” she murmurs, muffled in his shirt. “I know you knew her as long as I did…and she knew you a lot longer than she knew me. I’m sorry.”

“It’s all right,” he whispers, holding her gently and smoothing his hand over the crown of her head. “It’s all right.”

They stand there for a long minute in silence, holding each other up.

“I don’t expect you to bounce back from this right away,” he eventually says over the top of her head, “and I don’t want you to feel like you should. So if you need a break, from the base, or from SHIELD … You have my blessing. I want you to take all the time you need.”

“Thank you,” Daisy says, snuffling against his chest.

The next time he comes to check on her, she’s gone

May—November 2016
Daisy:

She knows it was cowardly to sneak away in the night without goodbyes, but she figures she’s earned the right to leave like that at least once. Besides, everyone would have had too much to say, too many questions or opinions about her leaving…

She almost understands why May did it like this.

She doesn’t know where she’s going, but she knows how she’s going to get there.

The van comes off Craigslist and is paid for in cash from one of her personal dropboxes in Trenton, and she immediately erases the vehicle from the DMV database. She had left behind her SHIELD phone since it was easily-traceable, but she’d kept her computer—it would be too hard to leave behind cutting-edge technology in favor of another secondhand laptop. Later, she’ll wonder if that was the weakness that undermined her disappearing act, or if it was a subconscious decision she made so that she could always change her mind about being found. She’d disabled the computer’s ‘kill switch’ the same night she’d left, yet she knows too many pieces inside are probably traceable.

Still, she has Coulson’s blessing to leave, and SHIELD is better off without her around for now. For a while, she’s just escaping, getting away from the place where every corner and surface makes her think of May. The longer she’s gone, however, the easier it becomes to stay gone. SHIELD may be the team, but the truth is that she has SHIELD because SHIELD had May…and the thought of one without the other is impossible right now.

She doesn’t want to give up, but this might be the only way she can move on.

Pregnancy makes Daisy swear up and down that she will never complain about her period ever again. Everything in her body is out of whack, and she’s daily discovering something else thrown into disorder because of the presence of another body inside of hers. Nausea at everyday smells, acid reflux that torments her for months, exhaustion after ordinary exertion, awful sleeping habits…it almost makes her want to stop living in her van and turn to Lian for a place to stay. Daisy still hadn’t told anyone else at SHIELD about her pregnancy either, and for now, she’s thankful, since she has no idea what’s going to happen next.

Unfortunately, the world is still turning, and the Watchdogs are still gathering a disturbing following online, one she can’t quite ignore even if she’s off the clock. When she finally dips her toe back into the action again, she starts small—moving their money online and donating it to charity, sending personal information of the most vitriolic posters to the FBI…

Eventually though, she has to get her hands dirty again when the gang pulls off an attack in Chicago, just blocks from where she’s camping out. Once she actually takes down a bank that was concealing Watchdog money, though, she knows it’s only a matter of time before SHIELD is on her heels. She doesn’t care if it’s Coulson or Mack or any of them who come for her—they don’t need to be involved in this. She’s the only one who needs to get her hands dirty to get this job done. It’s been so long since she did a workout or used her powers, however, that her first physical confrontation is almost embarrassing and nearly disastrous.

Recalibrating her quakes out of concern for the second person sharing her body earns her two broken wrists within a month. One night, she’s in the middle of a clash with a gang of Watchdogs on the streets and misses their man up on a fire escape, who gets a shot off on her shoulder before she quakes him into oblivion. Before she returns her attention to the men around her, a baton has flown out of nowhere and taken out two of them. She quakes the other two men unconscious as a pair of strong arms seize her and haul her to a car, one hand leaving to catch the baton as it returns. The person dumps her in the backseat and leaps into the driver’s seat, throwing the car into gear and
driving them away twenty over the speed limit.

“Hey, *sestra,*” Bobbi says from behind the wheel. “Keep pressure on that shoulder.”

They pick up Daisy’s van and skip town immediately, and Daisy is so relieved to see her old friend that she doesn’t ask any questions and doesn’t fight off her care. Bobbi digs the bullet out of her shoulder, splints her broken arm, and scolds her with the tone of a pissed-off big sister who knows Daisy knows better, then holds her for the rest of the evening when Daisy buries herself in the woman’s arms, absolutely starved for touch after her months alone on the run.

It’s Bobbi who pays for the prenatal vitamins and the acid reflux meds. It’s Bobbi who drags her to a family planning clinic and makes her get a checkup, the first one of her pregnancy. The doctor there takes in the casts on Daisy’s wrists and the wound in her shoulder and gives them both a steady look, but Bobbi is ready with some story about how she just got away from a bad ex and things are safe now, and she just wants to be sure that the baby is okay but he’s looking for us so please keep this on the DL, and the doctor is perfectly understanding after that.

“You’re far enough along that I could tell you the sex, if you want to know,” the ultrasound technician says, watching the black and white shapes on the screen.

Bobbi looks at her expectantly, but Daisy closes her eyes and wills herself not to cry.

“It’s a girl,” she whispers.

“It is!” the technician says with a smile in her voice. “Congratulations, Mama!”

Bobbi doesn’t tell Daisy that she should go back to the team. At first.

They stay in Daisy’s van for a couple of weeks, staying off the grid and consolidating Daisy’s intel into convenient drops for SHIELD or other law enforcement to find. They’re camping out in a motel in Utah, talking through the files snagged in their most recent Watchdog raid, when Daisy feels something she’s never felt before and suddenly goes quiet.

“What is it?” Bobbi asks, pulling the pencil out of her teeth and looking over at Daisy.

Daisy lays a hand on her stomach, the swell that she can’t quite hide anymore, and waits to feel it again. It comes eventually, light and foreign but unmistakable.

“I think…” she says slowly, “I think I can feel her moving.”

Bobbi smiles, her eyes lighting up. “She’s a real girl!” she says, elbowing up off the mattress. “Do you think I could feel it?”

Daisy takes the woman’s hand and lays it over the space below her navel. Beneath their hands, the baby nudges again, and Bobbi gasps excitedly.

It’s that moment that makes the dam finally burst.

Bobbi doesn’t ask questions, just holds Daisy as she cries, hormones and grief combining into an impossible tide of emotions that she was hoping she could keep a lid on as long as she was on her own…

But she isn’t alone now, she’s reminded as Bobbi kisses the top of her head and holds her steadily, unflinching and unafraid.
“She should be here,” Daisy eventually hiccups when she’s finally able to speak again.

Bobbi just holds her tighter.

“I know.”

A few weeks later, they’re sitting on the floor of an apartment that Daisy picked out for Fitz and Simmons, an open box of pizza between them, when Bobbi pushes a burner phone over in front of her. Daisy stares at it, knowing exactly what Bobbi wants, and shakes her head.

“I’ll email Jemma about the place once we’re ready to leave again,” she says.

“I think it’s time to stop leaving, Daisy,” Bobbi says quietly, holding her gaze. “You’ve done as much as you can without SHIELD resources.”

“I’m a nationally-wanted woman now. I can’t just waltz back,” Daisy reminds her.

“Then ask them to come to you,” Bobbi says calmly. “You know Coulson. He’d stick up for you.”

Daisy shakes her head. “They don’t need my curse on them too. Since I joined SHIELD, I brought everyone nothing but pain.”

“That’s not even remotely true,” the blonde says with a pointed look, “but what do you think your leaving did?”

Daisy stares up at the ceiling and says nothing.

“Do you want to do this by yourself, Daisy?” Bobbi eventually asks, still staring steadily at her.

Daisy shakes her head. “I’m a walking natural disaster, a fugitive, and a pregnant widow. They don’t deserve me bringing this mess back into their lives.”

“Let them decide what they do and don’t want to suffer,” Bobbi says, words familiar enough to Daisy to make her listen to the rest. “These people chose you. They love you. They’ve fought for you and stuck by you through hell and high water. And you’re an idiot if you think they wouldn’t move heaven and earth to bring you back now.”

So Jemma is the first call.

She shows up at the apartment with a gun in her hands but drops it at the sight of Daisy and Bobbi waiting for her together. Daisy watches her face cycle through all the emotions before landing on relief as her friend rushes forward and hauls them both into her arms. There is scolding for both of them, but Jemma softens quickly, exclaiming over Daisy’s baby bump and the state of the rest of her.

And then the next call is to Coulson, who is angry the way Daisy expects him to be and overjoyed in a way she wasn’t. He’s not the director anymore, Daisy learns from Jemma, so Bobbi makes her exit then, before one more person has to lie about seeing her. She kisses and hugs them both and leaves them with an email address to which they can send pictures when the baby is born.

“Keep each other safe,” she commissions them on the way out the door.

“Thank you for everything, Bobbi,” Daisy says with her hand tight in Jemma’s.

It’s the last time they’ll see her for three more years.

SHIELD comes back into her life with stories about ghosts in a box and a man with a flaming skull
for a head. Daisy is seven months pregnant when they chase down Eli Morrow. Eight when SHIELD publically reinstates her.

And then the baby comes three weeks early.

She doesn’t know why she’s early, but it doesn’t really matter—her daughter is ready to make her entrance whether Daisy is ready for her or not. Jemma is there, and so are Coulson, and Fitz, and Trip, and Mack, and Elena. They go to an actual hospital, because Jemma will not hear of her giving birth without the best doctors in the States around her and the best equipment available. She’s gotten doula-certified just for this, so she stays with Daisy through her entire labor while Coulson goes back and forth between her and the waiting room, updating everyone on her progress.

It’s a fast delivery, the doctor tells her later, but Daisy still cries through part of her labor, unable to not think about who isn’t there, unable to forget the way she’s doing this without the one person she hoped against hope might somehow find a way to cross time and space to be there…

But she’ll never forget that day, the way Jemma held her hand through the whole thing and stroked her hair and was the immovable object halting Daisy’s unstoppable force, the way Coulson went in and out reliable as a tide, encouraging her with the faith he’s always had in her, and she doubts she’ll ever forget the pain and the pain and then suddenly the relief just as the doctor at her feet cried out “Here she is!” and lifted her daughter up for Daisy to see.

Both her and the baby are crying as the nurse places the infant on her chest. Daisy takes deep breath after deep breath, and everything except the child in her arms disappears for a moment. Halley slowly stops crying and looks up at her like she’s the answer to everything, and Daisy has never been more terrified or more in love.

Her family is all there for her that day, more joyful than she’s ever seen any of them. Coulson looks at Halley like she’s magic and fusses over both of them almost as much as Jemma. Mack holds the tiny infant with surprising confidence, and Daisy wonders if there isn’t more she doesn’t know about him. Trip can’t stop grinning and calling Daisy “Mama”, and Elena kisses the baby and murmurs sentiments in Spanish with a soft glow in her eyes and a smile that brings Daisy’s back to her. Fitz is too nervous to hold Halley by himself but curls close to Jemma on the sofa when she takes the infant to rock her to sleep.

That night after all the visitors have been cleared out, however, Daisy wakes up at one point to see a nurse in blue scrubs standing next to Halley’s bassinet, stroking the head of the tiny baby, who is snuffling in her sleep.

“Is it time to feed her?” Daisy asks, discovering that her body is telling her it is.

The nurse jumps slightly, but smiles as she turns around. She has dark eyes and brown hair in a ponytail, but something about her looks familiar. Daisy doesn’t see a nametag, but she just assumes it’s another person she saw in the blur of the day behind her.

“Yes, you can go ahead,” the nurse says after checking the chart on the bassinet, then carefully lifts the baby and brings her over.

Daisy misses the starry look in the woman’s eyes as she opens her gown and begins to feed her baby, and the nurse picks up the baby’s chart again to study it.

“Halley Camille Johnson,” she reads. “Can I ask about her name?”

The barrage of emotions hits her again, but Daisy keeps her eyes on her baby and tries to smile as
she answers.

“She’s named after two people who saved my life, people who would have loved her so much but aren’t with us anymore,” she says.

*Halley for someone faithful as a comet, who saved me more times than I can count and more ways than she could know.*

*Camille for her father, since she didn’t get his last name.*

Once Halley is finished eating and sleeping against her chest again, Daisy’s tears unexpectedly start flowing as she straightens her gown. The nurse sits down on the edge of the bed, gently clasping her hand.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to upset you,” she says sincerely, dark eyes soft and concerned.

Daisy shakes her head, wiping her eyes with her free hand. “No, you didn’t. I mean, she’s… she’s perfect. I couldn’t really even picture her before she was born, and it feels so unreal to be holding her knowing she’s part of me… I’m scared to death, but I’m so happy… I’m just missing some people today… people I wish could have been here.”

She thinks of her own parents, taken from her before she was old enough to remember them. She thinks of this baby’s father, who she will never meet. She thinks of a woman who could have been another mom to this child, but will never have the chance.

“Family?” the nurse asks, and Daisy wipes her eyes, swallowing hard.

“I wish we had had the chance to be.”

“I saw all the people with you today, though,” the nurse says. “It looks like you’ve got some good people around you. And I know you miss May a lot, and it will be hard not to miss her for awhile, but you aren’t alone.”

Daisy looks up at the nurse, trying to remember when she said May’s name…

“And don’t be scared--you’re going to be an amazing mom,” the young woman says certainly, smiling gently at her. “Her future’s going to be beautiful.”

“Have we met?” Daisy asks slowly, more confused than ever.

The door to her hospital room opens at that moment, and a different, middle-aged nurse walks in, freezing at the sight of the nurse beside Daisy’s bed.

“Who are you?” she demands, a tone of confusion with an undercurrent of threat.

The younger nurse squeezes Daisy’s hand before dropping it and standing quickly.

“Sorry—I’m going,” she says, hurrying past the other nurse towards the door.

“Wait a minute, who are you?” the woman repeats, following her out into the hall. A moment later, she comes back into Daisy’s room, an empty set of scrubs held in her hand.

“She just… disappeared,” the nurse says disbelievingly. “It’s like she vanished right out of her clothes…”

Daisy’s mouth hangs open for a long minute. She looks down at the baby sleeping against her chest,
and the future slowly unrolls before her like a runway.

2016—2020

She’s all of theirs.

Jemma is incredible, as dedicated to Halley as she has been to everything else she’s ever done. Daisy wakes up more than once to find Jemma rocking Halley in the rocking chair Mack and Elena bought for her, trying to let Daisy have a few extra minutes of sleep between feedings in those first few exhausting weeks. Fitz takes it upon himself to build a mobile to hang over the crib, a network of clear bulbs strung with filaments and tiny lights that sparkle and glow like galaxies. Coulson, now without his previous busyness, spoils them both rotten with gifts and care and is always ready to take Halley in his arms at the end of a long day. Director Mace gives Daisy permission to stay on base throughout her maternity leave, and she doesn’t resume active field duty until six months have passed.

Halley is a force of nature, as she should be with a mother who can shake the earth and a father who was always charged with energy. She’s a miraculous, tiny person seems to feel every emotion to the max—always either extremely happy or extremely not. She the whole base wrapped around her finger by the time she transforms from a tiny pink bundle to a crawling, curious whirlwind, and it doesn’t take long for Daisy to admit that she was wrong—there is now someone in her life that she loves more than she ever loved May.

When SHIELD is allowed to move out of the shadows again a few months later, Daisy feels a surge of fear at the thought of people spreading away from her, now that they can live with their heads above the ground for the first time in years. She knows Lian would welcome her into her home, but after SHIELD being her family for years, the thought of losing them in any way makes her lose sleep for days.

She should never have doubted her people though. Two days after SHIELD’s coming-out party, Jemma invites her and Halley over to the apartment that Daisy had picked out months ago, the one that she and Fitz ended up purchasing. They’ve furnished it by then, and Daisy and Jemma play on the living room rug with Halley while Fitz prepares them all dinner. Before Daisy leaves that evening, Jemma takes her over to the second bedroom to show her how they’ve set it up—with sky-blue walls, a bed, and a crib.

“You are under no obligation to stay if you don’t want to,” Jemma says, clasping Daisy’s hand gently. “We just wanted to make sure that you know that there is always a place for you here.”

Fitz holds Halley while Daisy cries on Jemma’s shoulder, and then when she’s done, he hands her a key.

They get back to work, with Halley joining them at base or on missions whenever it is safe for her to do so and staying with Lian when it isn’t. It doesn’t take more than another year for Fitz to put a ring on Jemma’s finger, and Daisy gets to help plan a wedding that doesn’t last only five minutes in a Vegas wedding chapel. A few months after that, Mack and Elena show up married with no warning at all, and before Daisy knows it, there’s another baby in their lives, which works wonderfully for Halley, finally having someone her age around.

When it eventually comes to light that the new Director is not quite the person he’s been advertised as, Coulson is reinstated to his position, publically. He jokes the next week about the Avengers ringing his phone off the wall for days, furious and relieved and laughably amazed.
“You’d think they’d never seen a person come back from the dead,” he laughs, but Daisy can’t quite join him.

A few days later, she’s visiting Lian’s home to pick up Halley after a mission. She and the elderly woman are sitting in chairs on the back porch watching Halley chase the butterflies migrating between Lian’s flowers in the yard. It’s high summer.

Just a few days ago, May had been in the house behind them.

"So that was when she met Halley," Daisy says after Lian is finished telling her about what it had been like to come home and find her long-gone daughter standing in the kitchen. "And when she learned what would happen..."

"I didn't want to tell her the day," Lian admits. "But I knew she had to know."

"I know," Daisy says quietly.

There isn't much else to say about it. Hearing May's voice on the phone had been both water in the desert and a knife in her heart. Even in the moment, Daisy had already been devastated, knowing the call, her last promised contact with May, would inevitably end.

“Coulson named Mack Deputy Director,” Daisy tells Lian after a few quiet moments.

“And he agreed to it?”

“On a few conditions. One was that I be named his Vice-Deputy.”

Lian looks over at her with a proud gleam in her eye. “Did you accept?”

“No yet,” Daisy admits. “But I think I will. I think SHIELD is where I’m supposed to stay.”

In the past, SHIELD without May was unthinkable. But now, the thought of life without SHIELD is just as much so. May has now been gone longer than they were a couple, longer than the time they spent together in the present.

Daisy runs her thumb over the ring that has never left the finger on her left hand and watches her daughter chasing butterflies, still not sure how time-travel will come back into their lives, but knowing that, like a comet, it must. In the summer sky above them, a plane roars overhead, and Daisy looks in the direction the sound is coming from. She doesn't spot the aircraft until it's nearly out of sight, though, reminding her how slow sound actually travels.

She's only hearing it when it's already gone.

That night back at her apartment, Daisy puts Halley to bed underneath the dreamcatcher that used to be May’s and then sits by herself in the living room for a while before making a decision. Going to her bedroom closet, she pulls down a dusty box from the highest shelf. Inside, she finds the paper marking her gifted star, the List, a stack of photographs, and the envelopes, exactly as she’d received them from Coulson four years ago, still stacked in numerical order and awaiting a letter-opener. Opening them had once been unthinkable—it had felt like accepting a fact she could not bring herself to acknowledge.

But now, Daisy knows it’s time.

Sitting down in the middle of the floor, she picks up the first envelope and tears it open, unfolding the typed letter and starting to read.
Daisy.

Chapter End Notes

The story's not over yet.
Coda

Chapter Summary

*Coda*-noun-the concluding passage of a piece or movement, typically forming an addition to the basic structure.

Chapter Notes

(Long author's note up here so it doesn't ruin the moment at the end…)

If you had told me in early 2016, back when I first started this story, that I would still be working on it two and half years later, I might have quit right then and there. I had never stuck with a WIP for more than a couple of months at that point, and I had certainly never written anything covering this much time. When I first started, I thought the story would maybe—maybe—break 50,000 words.

Needless to say that’s not what happened.

I can say with complete certainty though that I would not have stuck with this story for this long without all the positive feedback I’ve received throughout the years, in comments, kudos, and tumblr conversations. Thank you so much to every single person who gave this story a chance, but double thanks to anyone who contributed via feedback to my determination to finish this story. Special shout out to those of you who have been with me since the beginning, especially Book_freak for putting up with so much of my nonsense for two plus years and never failing to encourage and inspire (I’ll get you on this canoe eventually ;) )

I am definitely thankful for the friendships/connections that this fic has led to—it’s definitely the best thing to come out of this process for me. I am still always open to chatting over on tumblr (loved-the-stars-too-fondly), and I do think I’ll leave the box open for prompts for the foreseeable future. Now that I know how many people out there are willing to give MaySkye/MayDaisy a chance, I don’t think we can ever have too much fic in their tag.

Again, I am so thankful for every one of you, readers. You’re the reason this story got finished.

[I may or may not just be stalling now because you getting down to the chapter means it’s really over…]

Anyway, here’s how it happens:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Things go from dark to light several times, from noisy and chaotic to quiet more than once. There’s not much to try to make sense of besides the shifts between noise and silence…nothing is very
distinct. She had tried not to imagine this part, tried not to think of anything past her final moments and what she needed to do in them.

But she had thought that the after would…hurt less?

The pain is what makes her finally try to move, to reach for anything she can feel in her surroundings…

More pain.

Tension.

Melinda opens her eyes.

Things are bright, very bright, above her, and she closes her eyes again quickly. She takes a focused breath.

I'm breathing?

She opens her eyes again.

She sees her arms on top of a blanket, dotted with burns. An IV is in the back of one hand and a pulse monitor is clipped to one finger.

And her wrists are shackled to the hospital bed she’s lying in.

She attempts to sit up, but putting even the slightest tension in her abdomen sends a lightning bolt of pain through her entire body. She gasps, then coughs, then can’t stop coughing…

A nurse is immediately there, calling to someone in the hallway and pressing her gently back into the bed.

“It's all right, you're safe,” the woman above her says. “You shouldn’t try to sit up though.”

Unfamiliar face. American accent.


“UPMC Mercy,” the nurse answers, understanding her unfinished question.

Melinda tries to say more but chokes, her mouth horribly dry. The nurse places two ice chips on her tongue and tells her to let them dissolve, then tucks something into her hand.

“I'm going to page your doctor. This is a PCA pump—it will deliver a hit of morphine when you need it—“

Melinda slams her finger on the button and lets the fog take her.

______________________________

However long later, she stirs at the sound of a door closing. Remembering not to move her body but rocking her head in the direction of the sound, she cracks her eyes open as a white-coated man with graying hair comes into view.

“Good morning,” he says calmly, approaching her bedside. “I'm Doctor Shadid. Do you know where you are?”
Something about him looks familiar, tugging at a thread in the back of her mind, but Melinda just squints.

“Mercy?” she ventures with her raspy voice, and he nods.

“UPMC Mercy,” he confirms. “Pittsburgh. Do you remember how you got here?”

_Pittsburgh?_

_What the hell am I doing here?_

She shakes her head slowly, and his brow furrows.

“All right. What do you remember last?”

The highlights of her recent past flash in front of her eyes with terrible clarity.

_A fire and a baby. A mother and a knife._

_Stars._

_Daisy._

_Pain._

But drilled-in training reminds Melinda that this is an uncertain situation and that she should give as little information as possible. She hesitates long enough that the doctor offers a leading question.

“Were you in a fire?” he prompts. “Your burns and the state of your throat and lungs would suggest that, not to mention the state of your hair.”

Self-consciously, Melinda reaches for her head, but the shackle on her wrist prevents her hand from discovering what remains of her hair.

“There was a fire,” she finally says carefully, telling him only what he already knows. “I was hurt, and I thought I was dying.”

The doctor nods tiredly, picking up a tablet computer at her bedside and entering a password.

“Well, you _did_ die,” he says as he opens a document on the screen and scrolls through it. “But we’re not really sure of anything before that—no one saw where you came from. We’ve re-watched the security footage a dozen times, and it shows exactly what everyone saw—one minute you weren’t there, and the next, you were bleeding out in the middle of the ER floor.”

Melinda closes her eyes, remembering the final brightness...

“Someone nearby got pressure on your wound immediately,” the doctor continues, “but you had no pulse by the time we got you on a gurney. We had to shock you three times to get your heart going again, then rushed you into emergency surgery. Took a while for you to stabilize, but finally, you did, and then we didn’t know _what_ to do.”

“How long have I been here?” she asks slowly, staring up at the ceiling.

_If I’m not at the Playground it must mean I’m time-traveling, but…_

“About three days.”
She has never, **ever** stayed on a single time-travel for that long.

*How is this possible...*

“What’s the date?” she asks next, more quickly.

*The when is just as important as the where...*

“March 2, 2023,” the doctor answers, watching her carefully.

*Seven years. I’m seven years into the future.*

*In Pittsburgh.*

*What the hell...*

Melinda is silent for a long moment, trying to absorb these simple, bewildering facts, but the doctor seems to feel a need to fill the silence.

“Since you didn't have anything in the way of ID on you, police came in to fingerprint you the day after you arrived. Seems like their search came up with nothing, though.”

**SHIELD never made its agents’ prints public, and after the Hydra intel dump, Daisy deleted everything on those of us still with Coulson...**

“Regardless of the circumstances of your arrival,” the doctor goes on, setting the tablet on her bedside table again, “it’s hospital policy to notify police when a wound like yours comes through the door. There will be questioning—we were supposed to call them back in if you ended up pulling through.”

“And I did,” she says slowly.

The doctor nods somberly. “You did.”

He reaches for the controls of her bed, raising the upper half slightly.

“You abdominal wound has been healing up surprisingly quickly,” he says, lifting the sheet and her gown to show her a large bandage taped to her skin. “With the amount of blood loss you suffered, it will still take your body a few days to stabilize, even with the transfusions you’ve received. As for your burns...” He pulls the sheet back further to look at her legs. “They’re also disappearing rather quickly, we’ve noticed. We’re doing our best to prevent scarring, but besides that, the nurses caring for you keep finding fewer burns than the day before.”

Melinda suddenly realizes why she recognizes the doctor.

“How long have you worked here?” she asks, just to be sure.

The gray-haired man looks at her quizzically, and Melinda holds his gaze.

“Since before 2004?” she prompts, and he nods.

She nods too, now certain.

*My last time in an ER was with a fourteen-year-old who had nearly died of blood loss.*

*She lived in Pittsburgh.*
And the surgeon on duty was…

“Did you call the police already?” she asks, returning to what he mentioned before.

The doctor shakes his head. “I was waiting to speak to you myself,” he says. “I don’t want to put you on anyone’s radar if I don’t need to.”

“I’m not—” she starts to say, but then realizes she doesn’t know what answer is correct to play it safe. “I’m not here to cause trouble,” she finishes lamely.

“I’m glad to hear that,” he says, “but I’m afraid the cuffs will have to stay on until we can confirm your identity. Can you tell me how I can do that?”

She thinks about it for a long time, then decides to attempt to appeal to his better nature.

“Could you bring me a phone?”

It seems that a tablet on the bedside is standard in hospitals now, serving as both digital charts and as entertainment for the patient. The doctor shows her which app to use to call any phone number, but Melinda’s finger hesitates over the keypad that comes up.

It’s been seven years…

She starts with the number that she thinks is least likely to have changed.

Someone picks up on the third ring.

"Wei?"

Melinda’s heart nearly crumples in her chest.

"Mom?"

March 2, 2023:

It takes usually five hours to drive from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, but her mom arrives in four. As Melinda waits, trying to imagine what her mother might look like now as an eighty-four-year-old, doctors and nurses rotate through, performing what seem to be routine checks, offering her more water and some soft food, asking her plenty of questions, checking her lung function, her throat, her burns, her side wound, her needle site, her pain level…

When Lian May suddenly walks through the door, Melinda at first can’t speak. For a long moment, the two of them just stare at each other, this white-haired woman and herself, until the doctor escorting her mother stirs them out of their mutual astonishment.

“Do you recognize this woman?” he asks, looking down at Lian, who looks up with an expression that nearly negates their height difference.

“Why is my daughter in handcuffs?” she demands, and a relieved smile finally flickers across Melinda’s face.

The doctor actually smiles too, looking amused. “Did you bring the requested documents—”

“In a moment,” her mother says, pushing past him and approaching Melinda’s bedside. “You let me
talk to my daughter first.”

The embrace she pulls her into jostles Melinda’s abdominal wound, making her groan involuntarily into her mother’s shoulder, and the doctor quickly intervenes, explaining the nature of Melinda’s injuries to Lian and the circumstances of her arrival.

“I’ll contact local authorities now to come and talk to her about her injury—“

“It doesn’t matter,” Melinda mutters, shaking her head. “It happened a long time ago.”

The doctor shakes his head tiredly. “They’ll still have plenty of other questions…”

“May we have a moment?” Lian interrupts him with a sharp look. Fortunately, the doctor doesn’t seem too affronted by her tone, and nods.

“We’ll be nearby if you need anything while you wait,” he says, leaving the door open on his way out.

When Melinda faces her mother again, she sees her taking in the burns on her exposed arms.

“How did those happen?” she says with a raised eyebrow, and Melinda almost smiles again, glad to see her mother acting like herself even in the face of such ridiculous circumstances.

“A fire,” she answers simply, and her mother meets her eyes, the first smile ghosting across her face.

“How are you here?” she whispers, sitting down on a nearby stool and taking Melinda’s hand. The gesture is surprising, but Melinda guesses that now, it shouldn’t be.

She is back from the dead, after all.

Melinda gives her mother the shortest version of the story about baby Daisy and Jiaying that she can, lifting the sheet at one point so that her mother can see her healing knife wound.

“Time-traveling like that had only happened once before—when the woman touched me on the ship last year. Remember what state I was in when Andrew dropped me off at your house last January? Same thing.”

“I think you mean January 2015?” her mother says, reminding Melinda that they both have a seven-year gap to fill in. “Yes, I remember that. But your time-travel eventually went back to normal.”

Melinda nods.

“Yeah, but the doctor said I’ve already been here for almost three days. I’ve never stayed on a travel that long, ever. I think I might be…stuck.”

In 2020, your mom said you were gone, had been gone for years…but she hadn’t gotten to this part of the story yet…

“I thought…” Melinda looks up at her mother, attempting her sincerest expression, “Mom, I really thought that 2016 was the end. I’d only gone to that one day in the future, though. I’m sorry I made you think…”

“Are you really apologizing for being alive?” her mother interrupts, squeezing her hand gently and hiding a smile.

Melinda gives up and shows hers openly.
“I don’t know if…I want this to be what it looks like, but what if I’m just about to disappear again?”

“To where?” Lian asks. “As far as I know, no one’s seen you since 2016 except for me and Halley that one time you forward-traveled to my home.”

Melinda doesn’t want to hope, but she can’t really help it now.

*Could this really be…*

Her mother is digging in her purse.

“I’ll call Daisy now. She’ll be so happy to hear…”

“Mom…” Melinda cuts her off, trying to stop her from grabbing her cell phone but still inhibited by the shackles. “Just…wait. Don’t call anyone yet.”

Her mother does pause, but gives her a pointed look.

“Everyone in your life—except me now—thinks that you died seven years ago. Why wouldn’t you want to tell them the truth?”

Melinda thinks of the conversations in her final days, with Coulson, with her mother, with Daisy, and the letters she’d left behind for everyone…

“…Because I told everyone to move on.”

Sudden, unexpected tears prick at her eyes, and Melinda looks upwards, squinting into the brightness.

“I told Daisy that I hoped she would heal,” she says softly, thinking of those final letters she had typed up for the girl before sending them to her lawyer. “I told her to let herself move on, to let herself be happy…”

“I think Daisy is happy,” her mother says with a quiet nod. “But that doesn't mean she ever stopped missing you.”

Melinda bites her lip.

“Has she...does she have someone else in her life now?”

*It's what I would have hoped for her...for Halley…*

“No,” her mother says. “She has Halley. There hasn't been anyone else since she lost you.”

Melinda is only slightly ashamed of the sudden wave of relief those words bring.

From her bag, her mother pulls out an ancient cell phone and offers it to her, but Melinda doesn’t reach for it. She sits in silence for a moment, avoiding her mother’s eyes, until the old woman eventually sighs, setting the phone on the bed beside her hand.

“Were you happy with Daisy in the time you had together?”

“Of course,” Melinda says, nudging the phone out of sight beneath her bedsheets.

“Do you not think you’d be happy together again?”
Melinda finally meets her mother’s eyes, begging for mercy, but just then, the doctor reappears with a uniformed police officer beside him.

“Mrs. May?” he says. “We need to ask you some questions.”

“I’ll handle this,” Lian mutters, getting to her feet with energy that seems impossible for such a small, frail body. “Call her,” she mutters in Chinese on her way towards the door.

No one comes to remove her shackles right away, and while she waits, Melinda endures another check from a nurse, who replaces the contents of her IV bag and offers her a drink from the cup beside her bed. After she’s alone again, her morphine eventually wears off, and Melinda is considering hitting the button on her pump again when a bright voice suddenly rings from the direction of the door.

“Hey, you're awake now!”

Melinda looks up to see another white-coated doctor in the doorway, this one female, with brown hair twisted up in a messy bun behind her head. For a moment, Melinda can only stare, sure that she’s looking at…

“You know, as many times as I’ve seen that short hair,” the woman with Daisy’s voice says, lingering near the door, “I always forget about it until the second I walk in here.”

_But it can’t be…which means it must be…_

“Halley?” Melinda breathes, unable even to blink.

The woman—not a girl, not even a young adult, a woman—grins wider, turning to shut the door behind her and approaching Melinda’s bedside.

“You can call me ‘Doctor’,” she says, picking up the tablet left on the table and entering a password. “And not just because I just stole a doctor’s clothes. How’s your pain level?”

Nothing about this makes sense, and Melinda stumbles out a question.

“Isn’t it 2023?”

“I’m traveling,” Halley says meeting her eyes briefly as she scans what seems to be Melinda’s chart on the tablet’s screen. “Present-day Halley is six right now. She’s with her cousins this weekend.”

Halley’s brow pinches as she reads a line on the chart and leans over to check the contents of the IV bag above the bed.

“You’d think they’d have given you…oh that’s right, it’s still in clinical trials this year…”

“You’re really a doctor?” Melinda breathes, catching up with what the girl just said.

Halley flashes a proud grin.

“Yep. Second year of residency. Right now, I’m actually the age that Mom was the last time you saw her.”

27.

_But twenty years outside her time._
“People in hospitals call me ‘Doctor Jim’ these days, but don’t mention me to your med staff. I’ve been trying to come in as covertly as possible over the past couple of days to work on your burns and your side, but this may be the last time I manage it. I think everyone’s noticed that lockers keep getting broken into…”

Melinda can’t think, can’t make sense of anything she’s seeing or hearing.

“Halley, what is happening…” she breathes, closing her eyes for a moment.

“Wow, I’m am totally blowing this,” Halley mutters, seemingly to herself, setting the tablet back on the bedside table and sitting down soundly on the stool beside the bed. “I’m so sorry,” she says sincerely, meeting Melinda’s eyes. “This is the whole point of talking to you right now—you still haven’t figured out what’s going on…”

Halley closes her eyes for a moment and takes an intentional, deep breath before opening them again and looking seriously at Melinda.

“This is your present day now, May. You were skipping around in time after the encounter with Jiaying, just like the last time you two met face to face, but right after you appeared here, your heart stopped. Medically, you died. For a few minutes, actually. After you were revived, you didn’t travel again. And you won’t travel again, as far as we know in my present. You’re done.”

Melinda stares at her for a long moment. “That doesn’t make any sense…”

“You remember how clear it was sometimes that there was some kind of purpose worked into your time travel?” Halley interrupts, still staring solemnly at her. “Like, the connection between your life and my mom’s life, and there was a reason you were there for her in her childhood, reasons you showed up exactly when you did? We may never really know for certain, but the conclusion that we’ve all kind of accepted is that when you died, the universe decided that you had done everything you needed to do. It doesn’t need you in the past anymore.”

Melinda blinks, her mind still trying to process everything. “But I’m not dead. And the universe brought me back…in the future?”

Halley glances away guiltily. “Well, technically…I brought you back.”

Melinda must be looking at her with complete confusion, because Halley reaches for the tablet again.

“Here, I’ll show you,” she says, turning the stool so that her shoulder is alongside Melinda’s as she opens a window on the tablet and begins to do things Melinda has only seen Daisy do with technology.

“Are you hacking on that?” Melinda asks disbelievingly.

“Mom started teaching me how when I was five,” Halley says nonchalantly, cracking into the hospital’s security monitor databank in less than a minute. “And this kind of security program is practically antique where I’m coming from.”

A window eventually expands to fit the screen, footage from a ceiling-mounted camera trained on the galley of what appears to be the emergency room. Patients lie in curtained beds, doctors and nurses are moving back and forth around and between them.

“Here you come,” Halley says, pointing at the timestamp in the corner. Three days ago, middle of the morning. “Right…there.”
On the screen, a shape materializes in an instant, sprawled on the floor where nothing had been before. People in sight of it react accordingly, but one figure has already leaped on the naked woman, flinging a blanket over her and curling protectively over her body.

“That’s me,” Halley says quietly pointing at the helper. “That’s a me from last year. And that’s me…”

A nurse in scrubs races up and skids on her knees beside the two, slipping her hands under the blanket with the first Halley.

“And her too,” Halley says, pointing to a person in an EMT uniform racing over with a gurney in tow. “That was a me from a few years back…”

Melinda’s limp body is lifted onto the gurney by three versions of the same woman, now assisted by other doctors and nurses, and whisked out of sight of the camera.

“I was in the operating room too,” Halley says, closing the window on the tablet. “Twice, pretending to be the same scrub nurse. And like I said, I’ve been coming by for a while to work on your side and your burns…”

“What do you mean, work on?” Melinda says, looking over at Halley.

“Oh, yeah, maybe I should have said that first,” Halley says, closing the program and setting the tablet on the bed beside Melinda as she turns to face her again. “Time travel isn’t actually my main ability. I don’t really use it that often, actually. The whole ‘watch but don’t change’ rule stresses me out, so if I travel it’s usually just to go back to happy memories and watch them again. Or to go peek in on things I wish I could have seen. Or to visit myself. Every now and then, I time-travel without meaning to, but you’ve told me what to do when that happens, so it’s not the worst thing.”

“But you have another gift too?” Melinda asks, still struggling to follow.

Halley smiles and reaches over the railing of the bed and lays her hand over one of the burns on Melinda’s nearest arm. A strange, tingling feeling blooms beneath her touch, and Melinda almost pulls away. But then Halley suddenly withdraws her hand, and Melinda sees that the burn beneath is now completely gone. Wide-eyed, she looks up at Halley.

“I can heal,” the brunette says with a proud smile. “It’s not completely magical—there’s some focused work that happens on my end, but according to Aunt Jemma, what essentially is happening when I use my power is I’m creating a bond with the other person and donating some of my body’s energy to stimulate their own body to do what it needs to do…faster. Small wounds I can repair quickly and leave no scars. Big things though, like your stab wound—I can donate and relieve some of the pain, speed up the healing on one part at a time, but I wouldn’t be able to do the whole thing before I collapsed.”

Melinda is still struggling with every response.

“My burns…they’ve been disappearing because of you?”

Halley nods. “Yep. Sorry I didn’t make more progress on your side before you woke up, though.”

A healer. Like Daisy’s mother…but backward…

“But you time-travel too.”

Like me.
Halley nods again, meeting Melinda’s eyes. “Remember when you saw me time-traveling in your Dad’s house when I was just a kid? I was nine—that was one of my first tries using that ability. I’d only gone through terragenisis a few months before that. Too young, according to almost everyone, but it was an accident, and it’s too late to do anything about that now.”

Halley’s gaze is somber, and she looks down at her hands.

“It was terrifying, obviously, but I wasn’t alone. You were with me. We got hit with the mist together, actually, and even before I’d started changing, you’d grabbed me in your arms and were telling me that everything would be all right…and we went into the same cocoon. When we came out, I had two gifts. We think that whatever time-travel ‘tick’ you had got passed on to me at that time.”

This is too much to process, and Melinda can only manage one question.

“And I survived that? I’m Inhuman?”

She suddenly feels like a little girl again, begging her Jiejie’s to tell her the mysteries of her future…

Halley smiles. “You’re fine. But I can’t tell you about your gift. That part, you’ll have to wait and see.”

A long-forgotten feeling flares, and Melinda shakes her head at the woman in frustration.

“If you can time-travel, why didn’t you go back before I died and tell me and everyone else that everything was going to be okay?”

Halley looks away and sighs. “I tried. You saw me that day that my father died—I wanted to tell you then, but I couldn’t. You know, the whole ‘things can only happen the way they happen’ line? I kept trying to get the words out, but it was like my mouth couldn’t move. But I was able to say that I’d see you again. I said the story wasn’t over yet.”

Melinda looks down, feeling the tiny spark of hope catching, a cautious flame.

“So I’m not going to disappear again?” she asks slowly, realizing what this could mean.

Halley reaches over and takes Melinda’s hand, their eyes meeting once more.

“No, Ma. This is where the rest of your life starts. Unless you’ve been lying to us for twenty years, you haven’t time-traveled since the moment you died on that ER floor.”

Melinda hears the tiny word in that sentence that hints at a life she never thought could be hers, a life she thought she had been denied in every way possible, but in this unbelievable future is not only possible but is actually certain…

But before she can ask anything else, the door suddenly opens.

They both look over as Lian comes into view, and Halley's face lights up.

“Laolao!” she cries, leaping to her feet and running shamelessly to grab the old woman into a hug.

Lian looks startled as she looks helplessly at Melinda over Halley’s shoulder, but Melinda can only purse her lips, realizing from the way Halley is hugging her that she’s coming from a time when she hasn’t seen her Laolao in awhile…
“Do I know you?” the old woman asks, and Halley releases her, grinning.

“It’s Halley, Laolao! I’m traveling. You know I’ll do that, right? You’ve already caught me in your house once.”

With a look of disbelief on her face that Melinda is sure must mirror her own, Lian shakes her head, smiling in wonder. “I thought I must have imagined that…”

Halley looks rather proud of herself. “Nope. I’m twenty-seven now. But you’ll probably see teenage me in your house a few more times yet.”

“Twenty-seven now—and what are you doing with your life?” Lian says, and Melinda doesn’t even mind feeling like she’s been forgotten in the room, happy to see her mom so happy.

“Second year of residency,” Halley answers, gesturing to the white coat that isn’t hers. “You can call me Doctor Jim!”

“Why in the world would I call you that, Halley Johnson?” Lian asks pointedly. “Did you marry someone with the last name ‘Jim’?”

“No, it’s just that ‘Doctor Johnson-May’ is a mouthful, and ‘Doctor J-M’ doesn’t exactly roll off the tongue either.”

Melinda is suddenly very glad neither of them are looking at her, because she feels her heart starting to race, the tiny flame of hope bursting to life in her chest. The sound of her mother’s voice and her…Halley’s voice blur into the background as she picks up the phone that was still tucked beneath her bed sheet. She flips it open and scrolls down to the contact name she needs, then hits Call and turns on speakerphone, since she can’t bring the phone all the way to her ear.

The line connects and starts to ring, and she hears Lian and Halley stop talking at the sound, turning her direction. Melinda looks up at them, her past and her future, and manages a brave smile. She’s very aware of her own heart beating.

Three rings.

"Hello?"

"Daisy?"

**March 5, 2023—Halley is 6 and 21, Daisy is 34, Melinda is 46**

“Halley-Mei…Meimei…Wake up, kiddo.”

Halley opens her eyes to see first the star-patterned pillowcase and purple duvet that she’s snuggled under, but very quickly her eyes focus on the person crouching just beyond it, looking at her intently.

“Jiejie?” she whispers sleepily, quickly trying to sit up. “What…”

“Shhh,” the brown-haired woman whispers, brushing her fingertip briefly over Halley’s lips. “Don’t wake up Andrea and Sophie. Come on—let’s go make some breakfast.”

Halley extracts herself from the comforter and climbs to her feet, slipping her hand into Jiejie’s. The two of them step carefully over Andrea and Sophie’s sleeping forms, lined up in a row on the carpet where they’d all fallen asleep together the night before.
“The handle squeaks,” Halley whispers as Jiejie reaches for the doorknob.

“I remember,” Jiejie whispers back, managing to open the door without a sound.

The house is still quiet with early-morning peace as Jiejie leads her by the hand to the kitchen. They pass the open door to Stephen’s empty bedroom—he’s staying with Tia and Uncle Mack this weekend to have some time with his boy cousins while Andrea and Halley came to Uncle Fitz and Aunt Jemma’s for a girl’s weekend. There’s no sign of anyone else in the kitchen, and Jiejie lifts Halley up to sit on a barstool at the counter before she goes to a cabinet.

“How about raisin toast to go with it?” Jiejie suggests, pulling out a loaf from the right place.

“Yes!” Halley whispers excitedly, and Jiejie smiles as she drops two slices into the toaster.

Is that Aunt Jemma’s bathrobe?” Halley says as they wait for the toast, realizing she’s seen that robe before, but on someone else.

Jiejie flashes a smile over her shoulder as she gets milk and butter out of the refrigerator. “I have to borrow clothes when I visit, remember?” the young woman says as she pulls down a bowl and pours Halley’s cereal into it. “This is the third time you’ve seen me, right?”

“Yeah,” Halley answers as the bowl is set in front of her with a spoon. “The last two times were at home, though. And you were younger. And how did you know I’d be here today?”

“Because I always remember where I was on very important days,” Jiejie answers, plucking the toast out as it pops up in the toaster and buttering it on a plate.

“Today’s important?” Halley asks around a mouthful of cereal.

Her big sister nods. “It is. I’ll tell you why after we eat.”

Jiejie asks her lots of questions between bites of cereal and toast, about school, about last night’s sleepover, about her favorite things, and Halley has almost forgotten that there is an announcement coming by the time Jiejie puts the dishes in the sink and leads her by the hand into the living room.

“So, I need to tell you something, kiddo,” the woman says as she sits down with Halley on the sofa. “You know how Mom was supposed to pick you up last night?”

Halley nods, and Jiejie goes on. “Well, she actually is going to be another day late and come get you on Monday. And when she comes to get you, she’s going to tell you something very important, and it’s going to be a little confusing.”

Halley’s brows pinch together, and Jiejie sighs, looking away.

“I don’t remember how…” she mutters, seemingly to herself…but then she suddenly jumps up. “Oh yeah!” she says as she snatches a framed picture off one of the bookshelves that line the room.

“Who are these people?” Jiejie asks as she returns to sit next to Halley and shows her the photograph. There are almost a dozen faces in the frame, but Halley knows all their names. She ticks them off, fingertip smudging the glass as she answers.

“Uncle Mack, Uncle Fitz, Uncle Trip, Uncle Hunter, Aunt Bobbi, Papa Phil, Aunt Jemma, Mommy,
and May,” she recites as she points to each face she knows. Every one of them looks much younger than they do now, and the area around them looks like a dark scary place, but they’re all smiling or making faces at the camera.

“Oh, that’s all of them,” Jiejie says with a nod. “This is back when they all lived in that place called the Playground together. Before you, and Sophie, and even before Tia Elena came around.”

“May could time travel,” Halley tells her older self with a grin, remembering all the stories her mom has told her about May. “Like you.”

Jiejie smiles. “Yep. That’s how you got to meet her in Laolao’s house back when you were younger, because where is May now?”

“Gone,” Halley answers, using the word Mommy and Laolao use most often when they talk about May.

Jiejie nods again. “That’s right. Or at least, that was right. She was gone. Lost. But Laolao just found her.”

Halley’s head snaps up. “Where? I thought she couldn’t come back?”

“That’s what everyone thought,” Jiejie says with a nod, setting the frame on the coffee table in front of them and leaning back into the couch with a sigh. “But she did. And now that Laolao and Mommy found her, May can come back and be part of this family again. Part of your family.”

“Where’s she going to live?” Halley asks, a little excitedly. She’s heard too many stories about May to not be excited. “With Laolao?”

Jiejie shakes her head. “No. She’s going to come live with you and Mommy, actually.”

Halley cocks her head. “Really? Why?”

Jiejie smiles. “Because they love each other. And believe it or not, she already loves you too. It’s going to take a while for you to get to know each other, but eventually she’s going to be another mom to you.”

Halley’s brows pinch together, instinctive defensiveness flaring.

“I have a mom,” she says, crossing her arms.

Jiejie smiles and reaches over to put a comforting hand on her back. “You do, and she loves you so much. But she loves May too—you know that they were married before you were born. Mommy and Laolao were so sad to lose May because they both loved her for a very long time. So now that they know May is okay, they want to bring you all together—so that you can be a big family of people who love each other.”

Halley is quiet for a moment, picking at a scab on her knee.

“Does Mommy love May more than she loves me?” she eventually asks in a quiet voice.

“No way,” Jiejie says confidently. “Mom doesn’t love anyone as much as she loves you. But the way Mom loves May…it’s a different kind of love. Like the way Tia and Uncle Mack love each other. Or Uncle Fitz and Aunt Jemma. Of course they love their kids too, maybe most of all, but the love parents have for each other is different than the way they love their kids. Not bigger—just different.”
Halley chews her lip, thinking for a while, and Jiejie eventually goes to put the frame back on the shelf.

“Mom’s going to call Aunt Jemma later today and tell her that they found May, but she won’t tell you until tomorrow when she comes to get you. You don’t have to act surprised…but you should try to go easy on Mom. She’ll be really nervous.”

“Why?”

“For all the reasons you just said—she’s not sure how you’ll react to seeing another important person suddenly in her life.” Jiejie sits back down on the sofa and pulls Halley under one arm. “You’ve had Mom to yourself for almost seven years—of course this is going to be a big change for you. That’s why I came to tell you first—so you have time to get used to the idea.”

“Will May be there when I get home?” Halley asks, looking up at her Jiejie, who shakes her head.

“May has to stay in the hospital a little longer, but then she’s going to come stay with you and Mom. She may look a little strange, since right now she’s got some healing owies and short hair, but don’t be afraid of her. She’s actually met you more than once already—she already loves you. And if you don’t know what to say in the beginning, just ask her to tell you a story about Mommy. She has lots of stories to tell about when Mom was a little girl.”

Halley nods, thinking of the possibilities, but the sounds of stirring down the hall make Jiejie suddenly tap her gently on the head.

“I’m going to go, before anyone else sees me,” she says, pulling away to look at Halley. “Remember, this is our secret still. And try not to say anything about May until Mom calls Aunt Jemma tonight. Let it be a surprise for them.”

Halley nods. “Okay,” she says, leaning into the hug her Jiejie wraps her in. “When will I see you again?”

“I don’t remember,” the woman says over her head. “Before school starts in the fall, I think. Definitely before your next birthday.”

“Okay. Bye, Jiejie.”

“Bye, Meimei. Be good for your moms.”

A second later, the solidness disappears from inside the bathrobe, and Halley feels it wilt onto the sofa. She’s trying to decide if she should try to sneak it back into the bathroom by Aunt Jemma and Uncle Fitz’s room when Sophie suddenly appears from the hall, her curly hair tousled and chaotic and purple princess pajamas rumpled.

“What are you doing?” the four-year-old asks, peering at Halley in the morning light, and she shrugs, kicking the bathrobe under the coffee table.

“Just talking to myself. Want some toast?”

**March 7, 2023—Daisy is 34, May is 46, Halley is 6**

Every second feels like a miracle.
It’s been five days since Daisy’s phone lit up with Lian’s number and she answered to hear May’s voice on the other side, stumbling out an unbelievable truth that changed everything in their universe.

Five days since Daisy was able to race to Pittsburgh and see her face to face, to confirm that it was really her, just a day beyond the life she’d disappeared from seven years ago.

Five days since she first held her in her arms again and kissed her and listened to her heart beat and wept in relief…

Four days since she called Coulson.

Three days since she called Jemma.

One day since she picked up her daughter and brought her back to their home.

May had only needed to stay in the hospital one more day, and Coulson had already smoothed everything over with the authorities and the hospital by the time she was discharged “to SHIELD’s custody”. Everyone had gathered in Daisy’s home before the two of them arrived, and Halley had surprised all of them by rushing out the door to hug May’s waist as soon as she was out of the car.

“’You’re the time-traveler,’” she had said, grinning up at May while Coulson looked on with an amazed smile. “’You’ve seen my mom when she was as small as me. But I’m cuter, right?’”

All things considered, it wasn’t a bad start.

The day had been a blur of a reunion, and Daisy had tried not to be selfish with May and let her spend time talking to everyone in turn—though their team has seen more resurrections than most people, it doesn’t make them any less significant. There are plenty of hugs and tears exchanged, and the children are bored with the event in no time, so Halley and Tony lead the charge into the backyard while the adults stay in and pass around stories, filling May in on everything she’s missed.

Daisy hosts with half her brain and keeps an eye on the kids with the other, but there are plenty of moments when she just stops and stares, unable to believe that that’s really May sitting on the sofa next to Coulson, that’s really May looking at everyone’s baby pictures, that’s really May between Jemma and Elena at the dinner table, that’s really May holding Trip’s son Gabe, that’s really May standing beside her holding her hand…

Dinner is a raucous affair with children running in and out from their table in the living room and everyone piggybacking off each other’s stories, collaging the years together for the woman who missed them. May herself is as quiet as she used to be in a crowd, though her smiles are always ready and her eyes never seem to lose that disbelieving glow of wonder.

Early bedtimes make the party break up around eight that evening, and Daisy can’t help but remember the last time she watched May say this many goodbyes and thank the universe that this is so vastly, wonderfully different than that night…

When the house is empty of guests again, Daisy sends Halley to take a shower while she and May put food away and stack dishes in the sink. When Halley emerges in her pajamas and asks for her bedtime story, Daisy asks May with a wordless glance to join them.

Halley seems a little surprised but is trusting enough as the two of them sit down on her bed together, and Daisy takes her daughter’s hand.

“I’m going to tell you that story you love, the one about the little girl who was lost and the time-traveler who found her.”
Halley shakes her head though, gaze serious.

“I want May to tell me a story about you.”

Surprised and suddenly nervous on May’s behalf, Daisy looks questioningly over at her wife.

May squeezes her hand briefly before smiling and leaning over to touch the dreamcatcher above Halley’s head.

“I’ve got plenty. But I’ll start with the story of when your mom gave me this.”

When Halley is eventually dozing off on her pillow, they drift out of the room together, and Daisy slips her hand into May’s after she closes her daughter’s door. Out on the back porch, she pours out the last of the wine left over from the party and hands May a glass, sitting down with her on the porch swing and leaning carefully against her. They’re both quiet for a while, swinging gently beneath the stars in the cold spring air, and Daisy still can’t stop thinking of how unbelievable it is that May is here…

“You kept saying today that you won’t travel again,” she says, her head on May’s shoulder, “but you never said how you know that. Can I know?”

May plays with the glass in her hands for a long moment before sighing.

“I’m not sure if you’re supposed to.”

“Does it have anything to do with Halley showing up to tell you?”

She feels in the stiffness beneath her cheek that she’s correct, and smiles even though May can’t see.

“She visited me the day that she was born. I didn’t figure out who she was until after she was gone, though.”

May laughs softly, her arm coming up around Daisy’s shoulders.

“Now I know how all those visits felt for you.”

“Frustrating and magical?” Daisy says, feeling May’s nod against her hair.

“Did she tell you anything else?” Daisy dares to ask, but this time May deflects completely.

“I feel a little bit like a kid again, to be honest,” she says instead. “Back at the beginning, when I knew some things about my future but still felt like I had no idea what was coming…how anything was going to happen.”

“So…like the rest of us feel all the time,” Daisy reminds her, looking up at May with a smile.

May smiles back, then leans in to kiss her lips. When she pulls away, Daisy raises her wine glass.

“Well, here’s to the future,” she says, smiling as May touches her glass to hers.

“Can’t wait to see what happens.”

Chapter End Notes
Love you all. Thanks for reading.

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