

Chapter 1 - Origin story

I was formless, a shapeless blob of consciousness bobbing in a void of sensory deprivation. I had no eyes to blink, no heartbeat to count and no mouth to scream. One moment my life had been seconds from ending at the wrong end of a gun. The next I simply existed in a void of nothingness that defied even that description.

“Congratulations! You have been chosen to participate in a new reality exchange program!”

A voice echoed in the void, bringing my mind from a downward spiral, screeching to a halt so fast I could feel the mental whiplash. Still, I could do nothing to answer.

“You have been chosen, your life saved so you may embark on a grand adventure!”

I had assumed my life was over, that the masked robber had killed me dead and that this was what came after. The voice... The voice gave me hope.

“Your destination has been randomly selected to fit your own preferences! And as every hero needs a power, we bestow upon you the powers, instincts and abilities of a hero!”

Suddenly my mind was being invaded. Thousands of images, ideas, bits of knowledge were driven into my consciousness like lightning. I could feel no pain but the sensation was overwhelming, all encompassing. I lost track of myself, lost track of anything while the images swirled around me, merged with me.

A war, a best friend, a love interest. A scientist, a monster, a shield. A future, a past, a return. I could feel the memories, familiar to me but still distant, dance and swirl as the actions, the abilities sank deeper. I could feel the muscle memory, the instincts filtering through me as I recognized them. Captain America. He was a character... I was a character... Who was I? Was I him?

No! I am me! I'm 18! Fresh High School graduate! I worked on cars, I was going to inherit my dad's shop some day! I was not him!

“I AM NOT STEVE RODGERS! I AM WARREN REEVES!”

The buffeting storm that violated my mind still roiled around me but the memories faded further. I still recognized some of them, scenes from the movies, moments in the comics. But they were muted and didn't tug at my own memories as if they wished to override them. Damage was done, knowledge still came, still wormed its way in, but I wasn't being rewritten.

And suddenly it was over.

"It seems as if we chose correctly!"

The feeling of invasion, of being overwhelmed faded. As it did I could feel my consciousness fading with it, my thoughts slowing down to a crawl.

"Enjoy your adventure!"

----- Several Months Later -----

I dropped the wrench into the tool box before grabbing the dirty rag, cleaning the oil and dirt off my hands. With a critical look at the engine I nodded, heading to the driver's side door. I leaned into the vehicle and turned the key, smirking when the engine turned over easily. I pulled out the key and dropped it onto the seat before closing the door.

"Hey Bob! I finished with the white car, I'm gonna head out." I called further into the shop, hanging the dirty rag on a rack. "You need help tomorrow?"

The owner of the garage, an older gentleman who looked to be in his early fifties exited his office and made his way to me as I started to pull off my coveralls.

"Sorry Warren, I think it's going to be a slow week." He admitted, passing me an envelope. "Here is what I owe you for this week, I'll give you a call if I need some help."

I bit back my disappointment, doing my best to smile and nod. "No problem Bob, I know how it goes. I'll be around."

"Have a good fourth of July." He said with a wave, leaving to go back into his office.

I quickly packed up as he left, grabbing my bag and heading out into the relatively warm summer day, tucking the envelope into my pocket. I walked away from the garage, heading to the main street, using the long walk to steady myself. Money was already tight, even with the semi steady paycheck, missing a week meant that was only going to be harder.

"I should check with Andy, maybe he changed his mind." I mumbled to myself as I walked. "I'll do that tomorrow."

It had been several months since I had awoken from my... experience. It had been incredibly jarring to wake up in an alley, dirty, sore and suffering from a headache, only to realize I wasn't in my small town anymore. Instead I was in Central City, a place I'm pretty sure didn't exist in my reality, at least not like this. And that wasn't even the craziest part!

I had stumbled around for an hour before finding an old newspaper, reading through it slowly. It described the heroics of a superhero, one called "Superman". I sat and stared at the article's

image for quite a while, the plack and white photo of an honest to god super hero. Needless to say I wasn't in Kansas any more. From there I made my way to a public library, gathering information on my new locations. It took me a few days to realize I was already utilizing my... implanted knowledge. There was no way I wouldn't have freaked out in this situation normally. But now I could feel myself compartmentalizing, setting goals, planning. Gathering information was part one, after that came step two, namely blending in.

It took me a while, and quite a bit of luck to get my feet under me. Bob was the first person who took a chance on me, despite me insisting I had to be paid under the table. He clearly knew something was strange about me, but he kept it to himself. He probably assumed I was wrapped up in drugs or steroids, considering I looked like a twenty year old gymaholic rather than an eighteen year old gearhead from the suburbs of Massachusetts.

That took longer to get used to than anything else honestly. I was a full foot taller, making me about six foot seven. My muscles were immaculate, the perfect ratio for my body. I mean I had abs that looked like they belonged on a fucking sculpture, not on me. It took a long few weeks to get used to the new broad shoulders and my appearance in the mirror. I still looked like me... just a lot more. Thankfully it wasn't like I was suffering. I mean I got the super soldier serum. And not the pansy version either, like in the old comics that insisted Captain America was just "Peak Human." I was pretty sure I got the good stuff, like in the movies where he was out running cars, kicking people across courtyards, winning tug-of-wars with spider-man and getting in fist fights with Thanos. I was absolutely straddling the line of superhuman.

It was almost worth the absolute violation of my very consciousness and personhood and the subsequent kidnapping from my home reality. Not to mention the continual struggle I was having separating what was me and what I had gotten from Steve Rodgers.

In any case, I managed to find a shitty apartment in a crappy neighborhood where rent was cheap. I did odd jobs across the city, taking advantage of my new endless stamina to work more than I had ever worked in my life. Bob's garage was a huge portion of my income, and not having it for a week was going to be tough. But I would be okay.

Probably.

I continued to make my way down the street, my bag slung over my shoulder, on my way back to the library to use their computers. I needed to look for odd job postings and before maybe indulge in my newest hobby of reading.

I hadn't been much of a reader in my old life, but now that I could read an entire book in a long afternoon and remember it perfectly it was much more appealing. As I came around the corner I came face to face with a man dressed in a white and blue heavy fur lined jacket, thick pants and snow boots... on a relatively warm summer day. He raised his arm, revealing some sort of futuristic gun.

I could feel my alternate instincts kicking in, throwing myself back around the corner, just in time to dodge a blast of freezing energy. The man laughed and aimed at the front of the building, blasting it until it shattered from the cold. He walked calmly inside, strutting like he owned the place.

I watched all of this from the reflection in a car window, my back against the building I had dived behind for cover. My heart burned to help, to rush in and knock the bastard down a peg. I knew I could do it, I had read about Captain Cold enough to realize his primary weakness was that his gun was the source of his power, meaning he could only aim it so fast, and when he was disarmed the fight was basically over. But I held back, jaw and fist clenched.

These alternate instincts, they felt so natural but they weren't me. I was supposed to be a normal eighteen year old. By all rights I should be running for my life, scared out of my mind, not calmly planning my attack strategy to mitigate collateral damage to the building and avoid civilian casualties.

This wasn't me, and I hated it.

So I did my best to hold back, to watch and ignore my desire to intervene. I managed to keep myself from doing anything, though actually running away seemed truly beyond me at this point.

As I leaned back against the building some movement caught my eye, the black car in front of me shifted just enough to catch my attention. I looked in, making sure not to pull away from the wall. Laying down in the back seat was a woman, middle-aged with a child in her arms. She was crying, softly rocking the child as she tried to keep the young kid calm. I waved to her, getting her attention, trying to show her that she should get out of here. She shook her head wildly, clearly too scared to do anything other than hide.

I shook my head and peered around the corner, Captain Cold now smashing open glass cabinets and tossing jewelry into a white briefcase. I slunk back against the wall again. It would be better to just let him do his thing. I wasn't a hero after all, no matter how confused I was.

A minute or so passed before Captain cold started to make his way slowly from the building, still full of swagger and bravado. Again I clenched my fist, holding myself back. This wasn't me. I refused to be-

A streak of yellow and red flew down the road and stood in front of Captain Cold, who stopped and sneered.

"Cold, that's enough." The red suited hero called out.

"Yeah! Surrender and so we don't have to waste any more time!" The younger hero in yellow and red said.

“Look who finally decided to show up!” The criminal called out. “Looks like I have a chance to try out my newest version of my cold gun!”

He raised his arm, pointing and firing a blast of cold energy from his gun without hesitation. The two newcomers, Flash and Kid Flash, started zipping around the villain. He growled as they ran circles around him.

“You can’t dodge forever!” He shouted, wildly firing at the brightly colored blurs.

He swung around, his gun pointed vaguely in my direction. My eyes widen and the world slowed down. He wasn’t aimed at me, he was aimed at the car!

Without another thought I released the grip I had on myself, leaping from my hiding place to stand in front of the car, intercepting the blast of energy. I raise my arm instinctively, my mind expecting a perfectly circular shield to come up with it... but nothing does. Instead the cold energy slams into my chest, completely engulfing me. The energy explodes in a flash of instantly freezing ice, the cold encasing me solid. If I had anything more than a fraction of a second I might have chuckled at the irony.

Instead I barely had time to even think before darkness swelled up to greet me. As the cold froze around me, a familiar voice echoed in my mind.

“Come, a boon must be paid.”

I slowly came back to consciousness to the sound of fists against a punching bag. I could feel I was sitting on some sort of bench, leaning back against a solid wall. But more than that I felt free. No outside influences, no unnatural knowledge or instincts.

I was just me again.

When I slowly opened my eyes I could see I was in some sort of older gym, the kind of old that felt reassuring rather than out of date. In front of me was a tall, muscular blonde man, hands wrapped as he casually beat the hell out of an old worn punching bag.

Steve Rogers. God, was I going insane?

I continued to watch him for a while, silently watching a loving legend. This gym looked vaguely like a scene from one of the many Marvel movies, but different enough to be noticeable. Eventually he finished his routine for now, turning to come sit beside me. He started undoing his straps, putting them on the bench next to him before starting on his other hand.

“You got saddled with one heck of a deal son.” He said, finally breaking the silence.

"I... Yeah." I agreed, my mind struggling to keep up with this surreal moment. "I'm sorry but... is this real? Are you real?"

"As far as I know." He answered, giving me a reassuring smile. "Things are a little fuzzy, I'll give you that. The last thing I remember clearly was piloting the bomber into the ice. But it feels real to me. They even gave me a boon after they copied my heroic spirit, or whatever they called it."

"What did you ask for?" I asked before I could stop myself.

"I demanded to be able to meet you." He answered. "I needed to see how you would be handling a copy of Erskine's formula. If I'm honest I don't know how all of this is possible, but I know it hasn't been very fun for you."

"Yeah. I... I almost lost myself. It wasn't just the serum it was everything that makes you a hero... which is everything. It almost overwhelmed me, still might."

"But you stood strong. You managed to hold on to yourself, and you still are! That's something you should be proud of."

I couldn't help but smile as he spoke. He radiated an aura of understanding and confidence, it was contagious.

"But you're worried that you're losing yourself to what made it through, is that right?"

"Y-yeah. Just all that knowledge, the phantom memories. I've gotten used to some of it..." I explained, finally finding my voice again. "I'm not a hero, not naturally. That feeling I get when I read an article about one of this world's super heroes, or watch a news clip... It doesn't feel like me. I want to help, I do! But..."

"But you're worried that giving in might mean letting more of me into your mind." Steve said, nodding his head, patting my shoulder. "That would worry me too son, I don't blame you in the slightest."

I let out a long breath, a weight lifted off my shoulders. For months I had worried that I was being a coward, that I was being weak. But he agreed, Captain America was scared too.

"You're shouldering a burden you didn't volunteer for. It's unfair, it's even cruel." He said, before continuing. "But I get the feeling whoever... or whatever is responsible for this doesn't understand that."

"Yeah...I got that feeling too."

We sat in silence for a while, the only sound the gentle rocking of the punching bag as it settled from its beating.

“Warren, you didn't volunteer for this, but it's the hand you were dealt. I know it seems cruel.” He said, hand on my shoulder again. “But I think you can do some real good. I think you can do some good without losing yourself.”

“I don't think I can.” I said softly, holding my sides. “I... I don't want to lose myself.”

Silence ruled again, before Steve nodded. He slowly stood, turning away from me, his arms crossing.

“You are asking too much from him! He didn't ask for this and what you're doing to him is inhumane!” He called out. “He can do good without all of me jammed in his head, he would probably do better without it! He is his own person!”

A long moment passed. Then a minute. Eventually a voice echoed throughout the gym.

“The gift we gave was not intended to harm.”

“The road to hell is paved with good intentions.” Steve called out again, standing firm to the bodiless voice, getting only silence in return for a full two minutes.

“You speak the truth. This was not our intention. Very well, we will lessen the load.”

“You hurt him. He has spent months in constant fear of losing himself to a personality you jammed into his head. Which you copied from me without even asking permission first! Just reversing what you did isn't enough!”

“What do you want from us, Steve Rodgers?”

“A boon. For Warren.”

“He was to receive a copy of your shield.”

“That's not enough!” He explained before turning to me and motioning for me to stand. “It doesn't make up for the pain you put him through and it wouldn't be fair to saddle him with something he doesn't want again!”

A long pause hung in the air, the longest one yet. Eventually the voice returned.

“Then what should his boon be?”

After a moment I stood, steadying myself before speaking hesitantly.

“Maybe... a weapon of some sort?”

“Is that all?” The voice asked, not an ounce of emotion in it.

I paused for a moment, debating if whatever was talking was testing me. Gathering my courage I looked at Steve, and frowned. What kind of idiot doesn't ask for Captain America's advice?

“What do you think I should ask for?”

“Well, a weapon is not a bad idea.” He admitted, rubbing his chin. “As long as you put the time into learning how to use it properly. But weapons aren't hard to come by in my experience. I think it might be better to ask for something you could never get somewhere else.”

My eyes widened a bit and I nodded, realizing he was right. This... thing, whatever had done this to me clearly went outside the bounds of reality. What could it do for me with that sort of reach? My mind went through hundreds of different types of stories, hundreds of worlds that they might have access to. Slowly a smile grew on my face.

“Forget the weapon. Forget the shield. Give me complete knowledge of Earthbending. Metal and lava included. And Lightning bending.”

The voice spoke, almost immediately, surprising both Steve and me.

“You ask for too much. We cannot introduce that level of power without harsh consequences.”

It takes a moment to recover from their immediate response and refusal, and a minute to think of my own response.

“What if I have to learn them?” I asked. “I could start with the basics and work my way up.”

“It is still too much. Electromagnetic manipulation and Geokentic abilities are too powerful for you to gain both, even in their earliest stages.”

“No reason to get greedy son.” Steve cautioned, hand on my shoulder. “Pick the one that feels more natural to you”

I nod, thinking of what I could remember from the two shows. Fire bending was all about passion, will and life while earthbending was all about enduring and persistence... a stubbornness that when met with a wall of stone, it was the wall that moved. I couldn't help but smile. It fit me pretty well.

“Earth Bending.”

“Very well. You shall start at the lowest level. A novice. Through training and practice you will gain mastery over stone and eventually be able to become a metal bender. You lack the mind set for lava bending however. We could change that, but judging by your reaction to previous action that seems unwise.”

I shivered and nodded, looking back to Steve, who smiled.

“Sounds like you have something much more fitting.” He said happily. “I’m glad it all worked out.”

“Thanks to you.”

“Don’t minimize yourself Warren. You held onto yourself for so long, I wasn’t joking when I said you should be proud of that. Not to mention you’re forgetting something. You may have been using my instincts to jump in and save that woman and her child, but you chose to. In that moment, when faced with letting someone else get hurt and potentially losing yourself completely, you chose to save them. You said you weren’t a hero before all of this, without my influence. But I disagree, that all seems pretty heroic to me.”

I couldn’t help but smile, blushing a little at the honest encouragement. I reached out my hand, which he took with a smile, shaking it. I held his hand for a moment longer before realizing something.

“Steve, when you wake up, look out for someone called the Winter Soldier, he is-”

I was cut off when he vanished, leaving my hand empty and the final part of my warning unsaid.

“Apologies, but certain rules must be kept.” The voice said, actually sounding slightly apologetic.

“You could have at least let me give him a hint! He deserves it!”

“He does. But we can not intervene further.”

“Bullshit.” I said angrily, arms crossed for a minute. “How the hell do I get out of here?”

“Like this.”

“Wh-”