Roots that clutch

by sphagnun

Summary

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“Hmmm.” The light touch is back in the Asset’s mind, and the man’s eyes grow angry. The Asset flinches, but there’s nowhere to go, no way to run. The vines hold it too securely. The Asset doesn’t try to fight, it knows better than that, especially when a handler is already angry--

“Oh, sweetheart.” The man’s eyes soften. “You’re a prisoner. An attack dog. They trapped you and stole you and tore you apart to make you obey. They hurt you,” he says, angry again, but his hand is still gentle on the Asset’s throat. “They dared. But you don’t have to be scared any longer. I won’t let them do it again.”

Notes

Warnings: off-screen murder of STRIKE agents, dubious consent both for sex pollen and neither sentient forest Steve nor the Asset understanding informed consent, and Bucky gets shocked with a stun baton twice before the STRIKE agents get bigger problems to worry about. Drop a comment if I’ve missed a tag and I’ll add it.
The forest has a thousand eyes. Every sparrow, every vole, every half-drowsing fox contributes to the forest’s awareness. The forest is old, and its roots run deep.

The men come in a line of six. They’re quiet, mostly, aside from whispers and the crunch of dry twigs under combat boots. It’s not difficult to know where they’re going. There's a temple at the heart of the forest that sometimes attracts attention, although it's been many seasons since the last human approached. What dwells in the temple is even older than the forest. The forest grew around it, becoming more aware with every spring, soaking up the magic the temple leaks. The forest isn’t malevolent like the being that lives in the temple; its sentience was shaped and tempered by the benign rhythms of a million tiny lifeforms. What lives in the temple yearns to poison, to grow, to devour. The forest is content to simply observe. For the most part.

The forest observes the men as they walk. One of the men notices. His head turns when there’s a flutter of wings, as the forest uses a jay’s eyes to track them. His steps hesitate when a squirrel skitters across their path. When the forest sends a wind to carry their scents to the sharp-nosed weasels waiting downwind, the man halts and turns, looking for the source of the sudden draft.

The man behind him reacts quickly. There’s a burst of sharp, electric energy the forest can taste in the air and feel through the ground around the man’s feet. The observant man’s body seize, for a moment only, and the man behind him puts away the rod he’d used to shock him.

“No dawdling, Asset,” the second man says, speaking quietly, but the forest understands. The forest knows everything the creatures inside it know.

The observant man bows his head in silent acquiescence and resumes his former pace. The air carries the fading scent of his pain.

The man walks silently, placing every step smoothly. He is agile and quick, light on his feet, and clever, to notice the forest’s surveillance. The forest is curious. The man is something new, and it has been a long time since the forest was so intrigued.

A moth lands on the man’s shoulder in a flutter of paper-light wings. The man’s eyes dart to it, then forward again. He makes no effort to dislodge the moth, although the men he’s with slap at the insects the forest sends to investigate them. The other men, the forest decides, are rude.

When one of the rude men’s footsteps slow, his pack is given to the polite man to carry. The man does not speak as his burden is doubled. The straps cut into his shoulders, but the man bears the weight, his posture upright and his breathing untroubled.

Polite, clever, quick, agile, and strong. Graceful, too, stepping lightly as a slender-legged deer, and with a shining silver arm. The forest has enough magpie sensibilities to appreciate how the arm flashes whenever a rare beam of sunlight crosses the metal.

“How much further?” the man in the back of the line asks.

“Eight klicks. We’d be there by now if Hendricks wasn’t so damn slow.”

“We should’ve given all the tools to the Asset to carry in the first place. Why did we bring so many fucking machetes?”

“Research said the temple was all overgrown on the satellite footage. Nobody’s cleared a path since the war. You want to clip seventy years of plants back with a pair of pruning shears?”
The man makes a disgusted noise. “I can’t believe they signed off on this tomb raider bullshit. You think there’s really something in the temple?”

“I don’t question orders.”

“I’m not questioning orders, I’m just saying, I bet once we finally get in there, it’s going to be empty.”

It’s easy enough to get the taste of their thoughts. The men are breathing the forest’s air, walking over the forest’s ground, and that makes them part of the forest. The forest has dominion over all of its inhabitants.

The shape of the men’s plans becomes clearer as they all think of the mission. They would cut back the plants, the oak roots and climbing vines the forest has so carefully grown to sap the temple dweller’s strength. They would wake the thing inside the temple, make bargains with it, feed it, take some of its power in exchange for helping it grow stronger. Strong enough, perhaps, for the temple dweller to burn off the growth itself, to stop the forest’s feeding.

The trees around the men shake with the strength of the forest’s indignation. This will not be allowed. The forest has been feeding on the energy emitted by the temple long enough to grow stronger than the creature inside. It has no intention of letting these humans clear a path to the temple, much less wake the creature itself.

There was a time when the forest could not have stopped this invasion. That time is many seasons past.

The clever man’s footsteps falter as the rustling of the trees grows louder. Clever indeed. His thoughts are not on the likelihood of the mission being a fool’s errand, or the power the temple dweller could provide, or the violence such power would make him capable of. There is no malice in him. There is only wary fear, fear of the men he is surrounded by, and fear of the forest itself as the trees continue to rage. The forest feels a warm glow of pride in the man for correctly discerning the forest’s attention.

The moth bursts into startled flight as the clever man is shocked again by the man behind him. His pain fills the air once more. The forest wishes the man would use his shining arm to crush the stick being used against him, but the man does nothing, even though he is clearly stronger than all the men around him.

“I said, no dawdling,” the man hisses. The clever man looks at him, then at the trees, whose branches are whipping more furiously than ever. The man raises his eyebrows, and the shock stick whines as it charges.

The forest has had enough.

The place the men stand is as good as any, with plenty of vines and young shoots nearby to use. The forest draws on its well of power and savors the sense of waking up, headier even than the first days of spring. It so rarely needs to actively intervene.

Still, the forest does act to preserve itself, and to keep balance within its borders; it cultivates, and it culls. This will be a little of both.

And if intervention means the forest can learn more about the man with the shining arm, well, it has been a little bored lately. The seasonal rhythms of life are soothing, but every sentient creature needs some variety.
The forest trains many dozens of eyes on the men, shakes out its roots, and *moves*.

The Asset knows when it’s being watched.

It is often watched. When it is quiet and still for long enough, the handlers and agents and technicians mostly ignore its presence. The Asset has learned how to sense when it’s under active observation and has perfected the method of disappearing while being physically present.

The method is failing now. No matter how quietly and competently it performs its mission duties, the sensation of being observed continues.

The moment they stepped out of the helicopter and moved beneath the treeline, the Asset’s neck began to prickle. The men around it are unconcerned. This part of the mission is simple transport, as the team hikes through dense forest growth to the mission location, and no hostiles are expected. The STRIKE team is paying the Asset no special attention. They are not the ones making the Asset’s breathing and heart rate climb to unacceptable levels.

The crawling awareness of eyes watching from the trees has only grown stronger the deeper the STRIKE team moves into the forest. The Asset has said nothing. Its insights are only welcome when they are directly mission relevant. No target or threat has been identified, so the Asset’s increasing certainty of outside surveillance is irrelevant until it can be proven. Nobody on the STRIKE team would take the Asset’s word as truth.

Still, the awareness is distracting. The Asset is so focused on trying to determine who or what is watching that it allows its steps to falter, and is immediately corrected by Handler Rumlow.

“No dawdling, Asset.”

The words are hardly necessary after the stun baton shock. None of the men have noticed anything amiss, nor paid the wildlife around them any special attention, but even the Asset knows that animals in a forest don’t run *towards* humans.

As if to emphasize the thought, a gray-spotted white moth lands on the Asset’s shoulders. It marks the moth’s position but doesn’t allow itself to slow. The moth, as far as the Asset can determine, is just a moth, not a tiny drone or in any way mechanical. Its weight is undetectably light.

The forest is much darker than the field where the STRIKE team had landed the helicopter. The air is quiet, filled with only the small sounds of creatures moving and plants shifting in the faint breeze. Wingbeats are easy to mark. When Hendricks shrugs off his pack and assigns it to the Asset to carry along with its own, the sound of birds in flight stops for the duration of the transfer. When the team begins moving again, the wingbeats resume. The Asset’s hypothesis grows more certain.

There isn’t *someone* in the forest watching them. The *forest* is watching them. It’s not something the Asset was aware was possible, and the mission briefing made no mention of the forest’s sentience, but the Asset knows it’s true. It can feel something new in its mind, a presence that doesn’t feel like the iron weight of mission objectives or the rigid behavioral conditioning that governs so many of its actions. The presence doesn’t feel hostile, but it makes the Asset uneasy, all the more so because nobody else seems to be aware of it.

The men discuss the mission. The Asset feels the absurd urge to tell them to be quiet, to mind their tongues the way the Asset has learned to stay quiet in the presence of its superiors. With every word they exchange, the forest becomes louder, trees shaking as if in a high wind while the air
around the Asset is calm. The foreign presence in the Asset’s mind is growing darker and heavier. The Asset fights the urge to turn and run back the way they came. The mission isn’t complete, the Asset must not abandon the mission, but its footsteps slow as the trees show no signs of calming.

The stun baton jolts the Asset out of its disobedient thoughts. “I said, no dawdling.”

Wood creaks as the branches above them shake harder. The Asset tries to think of a way to convey its suspicions that won’t result in disbelief and discipline. This must be mission relevant. Even as Handler Rumlow readies the stun baton to deliver another charge, the Asset opens its mouth to speak.

It’s too late. Before the words can pass its lips, it sees them coming from between the trees. They move so fast. Not one, not two, but dozens, perhaps hundreds, of thin strands lash out from the undergrowth.

They reach Handler Rumlow first, pulling him backwards with a startled yell. The stun baton falls from his hands. The next wave of tendrils reach for the Asset. Shouts erupt from behind as the rest of the men are attacked.

The Asset reacts instantly, rotating its left arm and snapping the plates together to sever the tendrils winding around it while its right hand readies a knife. Controlled slashing cuts the strands heading for the Asset’s head and neck. Protecting its throat is the top priority. Its legs are engulfed within seconds, thicker strands winding up and over its boots and pants, anchoring the Asset in place despite the Asset’s attempt to throw itself sideways and break the iron grip. The Asset can’t spare the attention to hack at the roots swarming up its legs. It takes every bit of its enhanced speed to prevent the tendrils from overwhelming its arms and neck.

The roots around its legs are tough for their size. Straining against them accomplishes nothing. The Asset keeps slashing, keeps clearing the softer vines that reach for its face, but the roots are climbing its torso. If they squeeze, if they force the air from the Asset’s lungs, the fight will be over in minutes, but they don’t squeeze. They climb relentlessly higher, stretching upwards instead of contracting.

The Asset’s right wrist is caught and held. A thick rope of entwined vines circles it, strong enough to pull the arm away from the Asset’s body, extending the elbow and denying the Asset leverage. New vines crawl down the rope onto the Asset’s hand. They force the knife from its fingers. The Asset’s left arm is overwhelmed, its plates jammed open as vines twine into the gaps.

Within seconds the Asset can hardly move. Roots and vines encase it head to toe, with new strands circling its throat and sliding over its goggles and face mask. The air holes of the mask are briefly covered and the Asset feels a sharp spike of panic, but the obstruction clears an instant later, and the Asset is allowed to suck in a full breath.

The men have gone quiet. The Asset hears only its own panting and the creak of wood shifting. No shots were fired. The men were unprepared for attack and presumably unable to reach for weapons. They now carry the silence of the dead.

The Asset waits for the vines holding its face to twist. Snapping its neck would be child’s play for an entity able to immobilize it so easily. Instead, the vines merely shift, adjusting their hold. The Asset’s face is left mostly clear. A strand winds around its throat and the Asset sucks in as deep a breath as it can, but the vine doesn’t tighten, only winds loosely down its neck to slip under the collar of its uniform.

Fine tendrils squirm under the strap for the Asset’s goggles. The strap breaks and the goggles are
carried out of sight. The Asset blinks at the sudden change in light. The scenery is disorientingly idyllic, with spots of warm sunlight dappling the undergrowth, the trees calm once more. The potential for violence the Asset had sensed has subsided. The presence is back in its mind, stronger than ever, but more curious than wrathful.

The Asset tries to close its mind off, tries to hide, but it’s never known how to guard its mind. It’s too tightly-bound to fight. The only option left is surrender, but there’s nobody to surrender to, only the unyielding grip of the plants holding it still.

The presence in its mind eases, the pressure lightening. The Asset breathes, trying to settle itself despite the uncertain situation. Mortal terror is nothing new. It has long been accustomed to fear of failure and punishment. It doesn’t allow itself to tremble in the hold of the vines, no matter how strongly its unruly emotions try to make the body shake.

A new sound comes from slightly behind. The Asset tries to crane its neck to see. The vines’ grip on its head is too strong, but a moment after it tries to turn the plants holding its body shift, so that its whole body turns to face the noise head-on.

There’s a man approaching through the trees. The man is short, slender, naked, and green.

The Asset blinks. Unless it’s experiencing visual hallucinations, which wouldn’t be the strangest thing to happen so far that day, the man is actually green, the light shade of brand new pine needles. He steps over the corpse of one of the STRIKE team members without pausing or looking down. His eyes are fixed on the Asset. The hair on the Asset’s arms stands up when it meets the man’s eyes. It can’t identify the feeling causing its body to react, but it’s electric, a prickling charge that radiates out through the Asset’s limbs.

The man doesn’t stop until he’s so close the Asset could touch him, if the Asset’s arms weren’t held stretched out to its sides. His features look entirely human, even though his skin tone shows that he’s clearly not. The green tint is lighter on his head and shoulders and darker down his chest and thighs. The fine, flat hair on his head is nearly white, paler than the curlier hair behind his soft cock. The plants react to his presence by swaying towards him. The vines wrapped around the Asset’s shoulders sprout tiny white buds when the man draws near.

“I thought this would be easier,” the man says, like he’s continuing an ongoing conversation. His voice is surprisingly deep for such a small frame. “I haven’t needed to communicate with anything truly sentient for a long time, and there’s no real substitute for language.”

The Asset says nothing. It has been captured before, and had to fight its way out; that’s the only protocol it knows for this situation, but the Asset already knows it won’t be able to evade the forest’s grasp for the entire nine klick walk back to the extraction point. It gives a hard, testing jerk against the roots at its feet and the vines at its wrists anyway, more to see what the man’s response will be than because it believes freedom is possible. Its bindings sway with the movement, but resist tearing.

The man ignores the Asset’s futile escape attempt. He raises his hands, and the vines holding the Asset’s left arm obligingly bring it forward into the man’s grasp. The man takes the wrist between his palms and examines the half-open plates. The Asset notices that he mimics a human form right down to the fingernails, his nail beds a deep maroon.

“It’s beautiful,” the man says, running his hands up the Asset’s arm with casual possessiveness. The look in his eyes is greedy. The Asset shivers, uneasy and overwhelmed, when the man transfers that look to its face. The man himself looks small and harmless, but the way he moves with absolute assurance, and the way the vines obey him, indicate that he’s far more powerful than
The Asset knows that nothing good ever comes of being the focus of powerful men’s attention.

“Shhhhh.” The man’s hand lands on the Asset’s cheek, his skin soft and cool. The Asset freezes under the gentle touch. “Be easy. I’m not going to hurt you.”

The Asset doesn’t dare question him; the Asset doesn’t dare speak. But it glances at the bodies of the STRIKE team littering the forest floor around him.

“They were boring,” the man says dismissively. His palm moves to the side of the Asset’s neck, his thumb stroking the vein where the Asset’s pulse is thundering. “Their heads were full of dreams of power and triumphing over weaker opponents. They were just bullies. You’re something different.” The man reaches behind the Asset’s head, slender vines lifting the Asset’s hair in advance of the man’s fingers, and unclasps its mask. The Asset gasps at the feeling of air on its lips. Its reactions are becoming dangerously undisciplined.

“What am I?” the Asset rasps. It shouldn’t have said that. It shouldn’t have spoken at all, but it’s never met another Asset. It’s never met anyone who could tell it what it is.

“Hmmm.” The light touch is back in the Asset’s mind, and the man’s eyes grow angry. The Asset flinches, but there’s nowhere to go, no way to run. The vines hold it too securely. The Asset doesn’t try to fight, it knows better than that, especially when a handler is already angry--

“Oh, sweetheart.” The man’s eyes soften. “You’re a prisoner. An attack dog. They trapped you and stole you and tore you apart to make you obey. They hurt you,” he says, angry again, but his hand is still gentle on the Asset’s throat. “They dared. But you don’t have to be scared any longer. I won’t let them do it again.”

The memories of pain playing through the Asset’s mind are replaced by other images. A bear sleeping safely in its den, a fern thriving in the shelter of a fallen log, briars surrounding a small, still pool. The images carry a sense of rest and safety. The Asset’s mind calms, easing back from the fear of punishment.

“What am I?”

The man smiles at him. “Everything in a forest is the forest.”

The Asset feels a flash of irritation at the non-answer, and the man grins at him. Wordless approval presses into its mind.

“Yes, I’m the forest. This is my first avatar.” The man looks down at his body with interest, then focuses on his hand on the Asset’s skin, eyes alight with discovery. “Human bodies have so many nerve endings. I’ve never accessed this much sensory data from one place before.”

The Asset swallows and feels its throat work against the man’s palm. It believes the man doesn’t want to hurt it, but it doesn’t understand what’s going to happen next.

“You’re so warm,” the man says, marvelling, and slides his hand down to the Asset’s collar. He frowns at the stiff fabric. Dozens of vines undulate over the Asset’s back and chest, seeking openings and burrowing into weak points in the fabric. The Asset squirms as many tiny points of contact suddenly register across its ribs and back. A moment later, the vines tighten, and the uniform top and undershirt both give way with a loud rip. Tendrils surge up and over the Asset’s right shoulder to clear away the sleeve with a second yank, and the Asset is left bare to the waist.

The man steps even closer, his hair brushing against the Asset’s chin, and hums happily as he pets
along the Asset’s sides. Some of the vines stretch out towards him, sliding along his knuckles as he strokes over the Asset’s exposed chest. The flowers dotting the vine by the Asset’s face open, tiny but fragrant, perfuming every breath the Asset takes.

“What are you going to do with me?” the Asset asks, without meaning to speak at all. Something is loosening its tongue, lowering its walls, leaving it unguarded.

“I’m going to keep you.” The man traces the scars at the Asset’s left shoulder with a delicate touch, and foreign sorrow and anger shiver through the Asset’s mind. “You deserve to be kept by someone who will treasure you. You deserve pleasure, not pain.”

The Asset’s body relaxes into the hold of the plants. Its neck and shoulder are warm and tingling. Strange. The angle is difficult, but when the Asset looks down it can see faint traces of golden dust shimmering against its skin. Pollen from the flowers.

The man sees the direction of the Asset’s gaze and runs a finger through the pollen. He licks his finger, makes an appreciative humming noise, and swipes his whole hand through the accumulated dust, smearing it across the Asset’s chest. The Asset gasps and twitches when the man’s palm crosses its nipples. The sensitive skin there reacts even more quickly than its neck and shoulder had, warming and tightening as the man rubs the pollen in gently.

“What’s your name?” the Asset says. The words come out a little slurred.

The man tilts his head thoughtfully. “I’ve never needed one before. What would you like to call me?”

The man should have a plant name, a green growing name. The Asset hasn’t been around many plants, except on missions like this one that involved crossing rough terrain. It doesn’t know many plant names.

In the safe house that morning, Rollins had put a sweetener in his coffee. The sweetener had been a white powder much like the pollen now dusting the Asset’s skin. The packet had a drawing of a plant, oval leaves and small flowers, with words below it, “Made with stev” visible before the tear in the packet obscured the other letters.

“Steve,” the Asset says tentatively.

“Steve,” the man echoes, and smiled. “I’m honored.”

The Asset feels a rush of happiness. Steve is pleased with the Asset’s choice, pleased to have a sweet name.

“You’re sweet like this, too,” Steve murmurs. “What’s your name?”

“Asset.”

Steve’s nose wrinkles. “No. They called you that.” He doesn’t look at the corpses, but the Asset knows who he’s referring to.

“I don’t remember any other name.”

Steve looks at him thoughtfully, then strokes both hands over its cheeks. The Asset suddenly pictures a deer standing tall under a half moon, his antlers strong and sharp, with a doe and two fawns behind him, sheltered by the deer’s stance.

“Buck,” the Asset repeats. It stirs something, very faintly, deep in its memory. People have names. If Steve is naming him, he must be a person, even if he’s not a normal one. That’s okay. Steve isn’t normal, either. “That was part of my name, I think. Or close. Bucky. Someone called me Bucky.”

Steve smiles and runs his hands over Bucky’s flanks again. Soft, thin vines twine down his chest and curl around his nipples, making him arch against the bindings. **Reward.** “Bucky.”

“What are you doing,” Bucky pants. His body feels--he feels--he doesn’t know what he feels. His nerve endings are shouting as loudly as they do for the stun baton, but the sensation isn’t pain, it’s pleasure, just like Steve said. Steve thinks he should feel pleasure. He can’t help but feel it. His heart is hammering in his chest like he’s scared, but he knows fear, and this isn’t it.

“Making you feel good.” The vine around his nipple tightens, then slides away entirely to make room for Steve’s mouth. Bucky gasps and shakes as Steve uses his teeth, first biting gently, then latching on more firmly and pulling the taut nub away from his chest. Steve relents after a few seconds and licks soothingly across the sensitized skin. **Primates are always in heat,** Steve says, sounding a little amazed. “Look at you, you’re ready for me already.”

Bucky becomes aware of the ache in his groin only when roots curl over the waistband of his pants and tear the fabric open. He looks down and sees that his freed cock is straining outwards, flushed and thick. He shouts, a startled wordless thing, as Steve’s pollen-coated hand closes around it. **“Shhhh,”** Steve says, while Bucky whines. His voice is low, comforting, but his hand is merciless, sending sparks of fire up Bucky’s spine with every stroke. “It’s okay.”

Bucky shakes his head mindlessly. This feels so good, **too** good, pleasure like this is **never** allowed, they’ll find out and he’ll be punished--

“**No.**” The vines around Bucky’s throat tighten and press against his chin, forcing his eyes up to meet Steve’s. “No more punishments. This is allowed, Bucky, I swear it. Trust me.”

A firm wave of reassurance rolls through Bucky’s mind. Bucky whines again, pleading this time instead of afraid, and Steve takes his hand away to step forward and press his body close. Soft roots tickle the insides of his thighs as they stretch upward. His cock is wrapped in tendrils that undulate rather than stroking, leaving him awash in chaotic sensation, but Steve’s arms close around Bucky’s middle and he’s grounded once again.

“This is allowed,” Steve repeats firmly, with calm confidence that Bucky can’t help but trust. His hands slide along Bucky’s hips and stroke over his buttocks. The roots around his legs move the shreds of his uniform pants aside, the tough fabric dragging down his inner thighs before being replaced by soft vines spiraling around his legs. **“You’re allowed to feel good. I want you to. Can you do that for me? Can you let yourself feel good?”**

Bucky whimpers and nods. The vines around his neck have loosened again, but his wrists and legs are still held tight. Vines creep along the dip of his spine and stroke glancingly over his hole on their way to explore between his legs. The vine tip presses against the sensitive skin behind his balls and Bucky jerks, white-hot pleasure lancing through him. **“Oh?”** Steve says curiously. The vines lace together to form a thicker knot and press again, rocking up between Bucky’s legs. The pressure feels unbearably good. He stops trying to fight the feeling building within him. Steve wants him to feel good.
“Yes, Bucky, that’s perfect. Let go,” Steve commands, “let go now,” and Bucky’s body writhes, his limbs shuddering and flexing, as sensation whitens out his mind.

Bucky returns back to awareness with Steve pressed along his front, licking and nibbling his collarbone. One of his hands swipes along Bucky’s spent cock, the vines still holding him retreating away from Steve’s fingers. He licks his fingers clean with every appearance of sincere enjoyment.

“You taste delicious,” Steve says, and Bucky wonders for a fleeting moment about carnivorous plants before letting the thought drift away. His mind is basking in Steve’s warm approval.

“Thank you,” Bucky says, talking about the compliment and the pleasure and the way the vines hold him steady on his feet, even as lassitude fills him. The sense memory for this situation is very distant, but he remembers something like this, once. He usually went to sleep at this point, but not until making sure whoever he was with had a good time. It was part of the protocol. It was important. He should make sure Steve gets whatever he needs before taking his own rest.

Steve’s cock is stiff and upright between his legs. He only looks down at it once Bucky does, and seems surprised to see it erect.

“Please,” Bucky says, and tries to push a wave of feeling he can’t put into words yet towards Steve. He wants to help, he wants to share the pleasure Steve has given him, he wants to be good.

Something must make it through. Steve’s eyes light up with understanding, and then the vines are moving Bucky forward, bending his knees carefully until he’s kneeling on the ground before Steve. The vines lower his arms so that they’re pressed against his sides with his wrists bound together behind his back.

“Like this?” Steve asks softly, his thin fingers petting over Bucky’s hair. Bucky nods and strains forward as far as he can with the vines holding him back. Steve guides his cock to Bucky’s mouth.

This is new for Steve, he knows, new in this body, so he starts slowly, carefully, with kitten licks along Steve’s shaft that lap up what precome has already spilled. It tastes bitter and sweet at the same time, melon juice and willowbark. When he takes the head into his mouth, Steve makes a startled noise and rocks forward.

“Oh,” he says wonderingly. “That’s good, that’s very--oh!” He breaks off into happy gasps as Bucky sucks, softly at first, then stronger as Steve’s fingers tighten in his hair. Steve’s cock is small like the rest of him, but long enough to bump the back of Bucky’s throat when Bucky works to take him all. The vines around Bucky’s arms wind tighter, and he realizes he’s been trying to move his arms, to touch Steve’s thighs. He wants to feel the muscle trembling under his palms. He wants to stroke along his calves, see if he has body hair, see if the skin there is as soft as the velvet smooth cock in his mouth. But it’s good, too, to feel his arms wrapped down tight at his sides. He knows he’s exactly where Steve wants him.

Bucky rears back, startled, at a soft touch on his own cock. Steve’s hands are still in his hair, and he knows the touch of the vines by now. This is a new kind of touch, satin soft.

Steve withdraws from his mouth and Bucky looks down. Another flower, this one deep pink and shaped like a pitcher, has opened in front of his half-hard cock, its insides slick and shining with nectar.

“I didn’t realize how good it would feel,” Steve says, almost apologetically. “You should feel it, too.”
Bucky might have tried to assure Steve the vines had been plenty good enough, but then the pitcher flower stretches upwards and closes over his cock. The touch is very light and wet all over, a tease more than anything, but his cock is so sensitive now that it sparks lightning through him anyway. His mouth falls open from the unexpected pleasure, and Steve takes that as his cue to guide his dick back into Bucky’s mouth.

Bucky sucks frantically this time, trying to drive them both forward to the horizon he can feel approaching. Steve’s pleasure is a low, deep tingle in his mind, the barriers between them thinning, and when Steve gets close, his body drawing bowstring tight, Bucky can feel his happy amazement at the intensity of the sensation. Bucky thinks the satisfaction that thrums through him is all his own. He did that, he made Steve feel that good.

When Steve comes over Bucky’s tongue in another burst of sharp-sweet nectar, Bucky’s own climax is like a reward for a job well done. The pitcher flower tightens around him delicately, milking every drop of come, while the vine between his legs presses inward gently, the double-sensation wringing waves of shivery pleasure out of him. He pulls back from Steve’s softening dick and gasps for breath, relying on the vines and roots to hold him up. He’s so limp he would collapse to the ground without their support.

“You are astonishing,” Steve says fiercely. His hands comb through Bucky’s hair, smoothing out the bunches and tangles where they’d gripped hard before. Bucky would lean into the touch if his spine were cooperating with his brain’s demands. “I’m going to keep you so well, darling. I’m going to make you so happy.”

More images flick through his mind. A cave, dark and cool even in summer’s heat, with glittering crystal streaks in the walls. A cottage, long since abandoned, where ivy grows up the walls and mice nest in the eaves, a cozy warm space out of the snow. A hot spring bubbling up between cracked stones and steaming in the crisp air. They all belong to the forest, to Steve, and Steve wants to share them with him.

Bucky swallows hard, his throat suddenly aching. He wants the things he’s been shown, wants quiet and rest and Steve’s hands on him, but he can’t, Steve doesn’t understand. “They’ll come back,” he says hoarsely. “They’ll send more men, with fire.” Bucky passes him the image of men with flamethrowers, working to clear the forest. Of grenades thrown from a distance. Of planes dropping napalm. “They’ll hurt you.”

“They won’t,” Steve says, with certainty, and presses understanding into Bucky, starting with an image of a forest that was younger. Smaller. Bucky sees a dark, oily presence staining a white-stoned temple: the same temple that had appeared on the mission briefings. The presence is malignant, unsavory, and the forest would shy away except that it’s drenched in power, energy soaking the ground around the temple, ripe for the taking. The forest creeps forward instead, growing, drinking, sopping up as much power as it can.

The forest gets older, thicker, wilder. Its roots stretch much further than the trees above them would indicate. Bucky feels the forest’s edges in his mind, sees the outline of the earth’s curve as the forest maps its influence. The forest is ancient. The forest is strong.

“It doesn’t matter how many weapons they bring,” Steve says quietly. As if to emphasize his point, the ground below the corpses of the STRIKE team splits. The bodies are swallowed whole, the earth closing over them in a ripple of soil and fluttering leaves. “They won’t be able to take you from me. Will you stay?”

Bucky pushes forward until his forehead is resting against Steve’s hip. Steve’s hands close over his left shoulder and the nape of his neck, his grip strong and steady, and Bucky knows Steve heard
his answer.

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