The Star Spangled Gal

by MamaDonovan

Summary

AU: Earth-3491. The events of the Captain America movies with Cap being born Stephanie Rogers, and becoming Stephanie Barnes in 1938. She is practically the same, but her sex and gender mean different expectations of her, from society as well as her peers. Serves her country but paraded as a different kind of mascot, as the ideal woman instead of the perfect man. Loses her beloved husband, but who will she turn to for companionship?
Til the End of the Line

Stephanie tucked her freezing hands into her father’s jacket which barely hung onto her shoulders. The iron stairwell tested her strength and balance even more than usual, with high heels she had yet to break in making her tipsy and adding to her pain. The shoes and the dress were the only formal attire she owned, and even the latter was bought just for the occasion. She didn’t even try to put on make-up, certainly not out of disrespect or because she didn’t know how, but because she didn’t want eyeliner to highlight her tears.

Before she was even halfway up the steps, Bucky rushed in from behind her, better-dressed and more composed, as usual.

“We looked for you after. My folks wanted to give you a ride to the cemetery.” He quickly caught up to her and kept his arm directly behind her on the rails.

“I know. I’m sorry. It’s just…I needed to be alone.” She wiped her cheeks dry, but failing to swallow properly only brought the tears back.

Bucky slowed down a bit, giving her more space and pausing like he was trying to rewrite a script in his mind, “…How was it?”

“Okay…” Stephanie smoothed out the bang strands that her hair clip failed to keep back, “…She’s with dad now.”

It wasn’t until she said that that it finally sunk in that she was an orphan. She wasn’t a child anymore, but losing your parents is never easy, no matter how old you are, or how close you were. She wasn’t old enough to remember her father’s death, but she remembered the effect it had on her mother. Things got so much harder, and it wasn’t just the money. Even when her mother miraculously paid the rent and food bill in the same month, it didn’t stop the way people looked at her. She was poor, Irish, and now a widow.

Once Stephanie was old enough to realize how hard her mother was working just to support the two of them, she wondered how much had changed because her father had passed away. With her husband gone, her mother had to work double shifts at the garment factory. She had to fight off even more lecherous dogs, only some of which had waited until she was no longer “spoken for.” Now that she was gone, it was Stephanie’s turn to feel the waves of change envelope her from behind and pull her away from shore.

As she tightened her shoulders like she was anticipating a hard slap on the back, Bucky had been carefully watching his distance from her, close enough to talk, but far enough as if he’d have to turn and run any second, “Steph, I wanted to ask-“

“I know what you’re going to say, Buck,” Stephanie knew that from the minute she saw him at the church with his hand tucked in his pocket that he was going to ask her to marry him. Yes, they had been best friends for years, and yes, they knew they were in love and she didn’t want anyone else, but something didn’t feel right. It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. A proposal after her mother’s funeral? How was she supposed to react to that? Why did he wait until her weakest hour?

“But Steph, it’ll be great! We’ll get our own place. We’ll put the couch cushions on the floor like when we were kids. It’ll be fun! I’ll take out the trash, you shine the shoes...” Bucky pleaded with her like he had this whole new life for them already set up and as soon as she said yes, he was going to immediately whisk her off to this new apartment with this couch fort waiting for them, “Stephanie...please.”
“Thank you, Buck…” She finally turned around to face him once they reached the door of her apartment, and it was so hard to look into his desperate blue eyes and turn him down, that she finally started to question if she should, “That’s very sweet, but I can get by on…”

Before she could finish, he was already down on one knee, with the biggest surprise of her life. The proposal was expected, but what she didn’t anticipate was the ring. The aged brass band was decorated with only a small smooth speck of glass where a rich man would have a diamond. It was her mother’s wedding ring! She had wanted to bury it with her, but it mysteriously went missing about two weeks ago. She thought someone had stolen it, but her mother didn’t seem bothered, claiming it would “turn up eventually.” If Bucky had it, then that meant that she wanted…

“On your own? I know. She knew it, too. The thing is, you don’t have to…” He took her hand, which no longer hesitated, “…because I’m with you til’ the end of the line.”
Stephanie was first in line at the recruitment center for the new Women’s Army Corps, and she was also the first one they turned down. She was too frail and sickly. She was better off at home.

The cinema always helped her clear her thoughts when she was frustrated, but watching the Army recruitment trailer just made her disappointed all over again. When she heard that the Army was training women to, in their words, “replace men,” she was ecstatic for the opportunity to do the same job as Bucky. Now she would be grateful to be accepted as a nurse, but they assured her she would catch something within a week out in the field and be totally out of commission. She watched the soldiers and nurses on the screen with envy and adoration until a loud heckler yelled, “C’mon, start the cartoon already!”

“Hey you want to shut up?!” She barked at him, not realizing he was four times her size until he stood up and dragged her by the arm out into the alley.

“That wasn’t very ladylike, little missy. “ The bully grabbed squeezed both her arms tightly as he lifted and pressed her against the wall. She immediately hacked a big loogie in his face.

“Augh, you little bitch!” He flung her into the trash bins like a rag doll, but she stood right back up and lunged towards him with her fists beating his chest as hard as she could.

“Oh, a scrapper, are ya?” He grabbed her wrists mid-air and threw her down harshly on the dirt. She pulled herself up again, almost impressing him.

“Aw, you gonna cry and run back home?” He taunted her when he spotted the barest trace of wetness on her cheek.

“Are you kidding me? I could do this all day.” She was used to this song and dance by now. She learned a long time ago that guys were not as reluctant to hit girls as they said they were. Her opponent marched towards her, trying to back her into the corner of the alley, until his legs were kicked from under him by a tall sharply-dressed man in uniform who proceeded to kick him in the stomach once it was on the ground.

“You like picking on little girls?!” Bucky kicked him in the chest before lifting him by his collar and throwing him into the wall, “You like beating on my poor wife, asshole?!”

Bucky was normally a sensible person, but when someone hurt Stephanie, he turned into a ruthless beast. Even as the guy was screaming for him to stop, Bucky punched his teeth right out of his mouth.

“Bucky, that’s enough! He gets it!” Stephanie shouted. Bucky gave one last punch, dropped him, took Stephanie’s hand and walked away with her.

“I had him on the ropes, Buck.” Stephanie joked to lighten the mood, but Bucky was still too furious.

“This isn’t a joke, Steph. You know what he could’ve done to you.” He held her shoulders gently and kissed her fervently on her cheek where the tear trail was.

“I’ve dealt with bigger guys than that.” She loved how he felt, but wasn’t too fond of when he treated her like she was made out of glass.

“That’s the problem. I’m not mad at you. I’m mad at them, if they’re trying to make you fight them,
then they’d also want to-“

“I get it, Bucky. I’ll try to avoid them next time.” She gave him the same line she always did to calm him down, but they both knew she wasn’t going to try very hard, “Nice suit, where can I get one?”

“You tried again? How many times is this?” Bucky pulled the paperwork out from her shirt’s pocket, “…Jersey, really?”

She rested her head on his chest as they walked, “So you got your orders?”

“The 107th, Sergeant James Barnes, shipping out for England tomorrow morning.” He wrapped his arm around her tiny shoulders.

“I should be going with you.” She clung tightly.

“Well, Mrs. Barnes, I’m going to take you home and get you all dolled up, because I’m going to make our last night together amazing.” He picked her up bridal style and kissed her nose.

“Where are we going, Buck?” She chuckled.

“The future.”
Stephanie smoothed the blue floral print of her dress as they walked down the pavilion, “I’m not sure if the red lipstick goes with this.”

“You’re a doll, Steph, the prettiest gal in Brooklyn.” Bucky wrapped his left arm around her, “If you need my coat, let me know.”

Stephanie played with the curls she made, hoping they didn’t give away how out of practice she was. She still liked to look neat when it mattered, and her husband’s last night in town meant going all out. The Stark exhibition was by far the most impressive. At first it seemed like all flair, but the demos, at least the ones that worked, made Bucky’s eyes almost pop out of his head. When the crowds got too packed and too tall for Stephanie to see, Bucky would lift her on his shoulders. It was the only way she could see the top of anyone’s head, and it gave her the best seat when the fireworks shot into the dusk.

For a moment, nothing mattered but her having a good time with Bucky, but then she saw the poster, with the bright blue words, “Are you a girl with a Star-Spangled heart?”

The women in the WAC recruitment posters looked the same as the ones for war bonds and housekeeping ads: tall with curves and supple cheeks. Perfect make-up that was both professional and feminine. A tiny thing like Stephanie was only attractive if she was docile and demure. They had a recruitment office set up right there, waiting for women who looked like the ones in the posters to get the nerve to sign up. It was worth at least one more shot. She finally convinced Bucky to release her from his hold by telling him that she had to use the restroom, however, he could tell that the look in her eye was much too excited than for a simple toilet. He snuck up behind her while she was comparing herself to the mannequin in uniform again.

“Steph, I think you’re missing the point of ‘our last night’ together.” He dropped his hand on her shoulder.

“Well, it’s a fair, I thought I’d try my luck…” She looked down at her shoes like a child who’d been caught sneaking dessert.

“You’re seriously going to do this again? As who, Mrs. Barnes from Ohio? They’ll catch you, or worse, they’ll actually take you.”

“I know you don’t want me to do this, but I can-“

“This isn’t a game, Steph, it’s a war.” Bucky picked her chin up with his finger.

“I know it’s a war!” She pulled away, sick of being handled like delicate toy.

“Why do you even want to go out there?! You need to get a job here. What about our apartment? We have a home here, Steph. Someone has to take care of it!”

“So you expect me to be the little housewife who cleans your side of the room over and over again and cooks too much food and wistfully stares out the window waiting for you to come home?!” Her voice got screechy as she felt tears in her eyes.

“Oh, I’m sorry if I want my wife to be safe and holding the fort down when I can’t be here to protect either!”
“I’m not going to work double shifts at a garment factory just to come home to an empty apartment! We don’t even have kids that I need to take care of! So why not?! If I can’t do the simplest things that women are doing for their country, why can’t I at least try to do what the men are doing?! Everyone is doing SOMETHING, it’s my duty to do something, too.”

The comment about children stung Bucky deep in his heart. They’d been married for almost five years now; it’s not like they haven’t tried. The doctors told Stephanie the same thing she had been hearing her entire life. Too small, too weak, she won’t survive. As always, Stephanie didn’t listen, until she almost bled to death in the bathroom before even a single trimester had passed. No matter what he faced out there, nothing could terrify him more than when he sprinted ten blocks carrying her unconscious body to the hospital.

“Stephanie Grace Rogers…” He pulled her into a hug before she could turn away, “…You don’t have to prove anything to anyone, not even me.”

When she felt his warm chest pressed against her cheek, she finally started to feel the guilt set it. She knew Bucky was so protective of her, the least she could do was give him some peace of mind, especially on their last night. Once the tears came down, she realized that she wasn’t just crying for herself, deep down she feared that Bucky might not make it home. This might be their last chance to be this happy.

“I’m sorry I blew up on ya, are we still going dancing?” She wiped the tears off of her face.

“Yes we are.” He smiled as he took both of her hands and swung them around.
A good night out wasn’t complete without swing dancing. Stephanie pulled Bucky’s sleeve harder the closer they got to the club. Bucky ordered a shot of bourbon for himself and a scotch for his lady. It had always been hard for Bucky to tell when she had had enough because drunk Stephanie was too similar to sober Stephanie.

“C’mon Bucky, they’re playing our song!” She rushed out twirling her little dress around. She hollered in joy as he spun her around and flipped her in mid-air. He slid her under his legs and right back into his arms. They spent all their energy and grace on the swing and found themselves sweating and stumbling through the slow jazz. Bucky was almost sure that Steph dozed off for a bit when he felt her head rest on his chest.

“Had enough, Steph?” He grinned as he slow danced with her in their little corner of the club.

“Mmm…one more dance.” She stood on her tip toes with puckered lips and he bent down to meet them with his.

They still had one last fun thing planned before he left.

“Look at this thing. I tried to get one of those teddies, and they said this was the only thing they had in my size. It was made for a freaking child, Buck!” Stephanie’s cheeks got red as she ranted in her loose-fitting silk slip that came down to her knees.

“You’re….you’re gorgeous, doll.” Bucky couldn’t unbutton his pants fast enough.

“You really think it looks okay?” She tugged on the shoulder strap.

“C’mere.” He pulled her on top of him and kissed her hard. He ran his palms up and down her neck and shoulders, squeezing the spot in between.

“Mm! Oh Bucky…” She shivered to his practiced touch, which still explored every inch of her and squeezed whatever was soft. He just loved to feel her, from the skin of her thighs up to her messy blonde hair. He slid his fingers in just enough to make her gasp and then brought them to his mouth to taste for himself. His hunger for her grew immensely, and he rolled to get her on her back so he could crawl down between her legs, which opened for him with anticipation. He rested her thighs on his shoulders and swirled his tongue around inside her, tasting her wetness. She shivered and grabbed onto his hair, panting as she felt her heart race so fast she thought it would spring out of her chest. The more cute little moans she made, the harder he got. He squeezed her hips and could feel her little body quivering.

When she was good and wet, she pushed his head off of her so she could give him the same delicate treatment. Bucky threw off the rest of his clothes and sat up against the headboard while Stephanie crawled to his lap, massaging his dick and teasing the tip with her lips. He pushed her hair behind her ears as he watched her fill her warm mouth with as much of him as she could. She eagerly bobbed her head, making his length grate against the roof of her mouth. Where Bucky was gentle and slow, Stephanie was fast and sloppy. When she pulled him out periodically to take a breath, several strands of saliva remained to connect them. She chuckled when she heard him gasp and hiss.

“Steph, I can’t take much more of this without busting.”

She rubbed her knee gently against his crotch as she kissed up his sweating stomach and chest until she could lock lips with him. He always let her be on top because of her size, and it was easier for
them to hold each other if she straddled his lap while he was sitting up. After slipping on some protection, she guided him into her slit, pushing him in slowly but easily.

“Aah…!” She yelped as she felt him fill her to her core, burying her face in his chest.

“You alright?” He wrapped his arms around her, petting her hair and kissing the top of her head.

“Mhm, I’m okay.” She breathed deeply, letting herself adjust to him. When she was ready to move, she hooked her arms around his neck, moaning into his chest. She bounced herself up and down to set a pace, and Bucky firmly grabbed her behind to support her movements. Once she got into the synch of it, she got faster, hopping on him like a happy little bunny. Each little thrust sent a punch of delight through both of their systems, with Stephanie’s tight form squeezing Bucky’s dick, and Bucky’s size stretching Stephanie’s walls. Her high-pitched whimpering could only be quieted by his tender kiss, which he gave her often.

“B-Bucky…” She gasped and clung to him harder as she felt her climax approaching.

“I know...Me too…” He groaned and involuntarily squeezed her and pressed her head into him, muffling her own cries of ecstasy. He finished with quiet grunts and an upward thrust into her. She slipped herself off and collapsed on her side of the bed, exhausted and red in the face. The aftershocks made her legs twitch. Bucky kissed her forehead and pulled the sheets over them. As tired as she was, Stephanie couldn’t fall asleep that easily. She finally had to face what they had been trying to ignore all evening. If something happened out there, this would the last time they were together. These would be the final memories that she would cling onto, as they handed her the flag and lowered him into the ground. If she closed her eyes now, she was wasting precious time. Bucky spooned her, enveloping her in warmth that made sleep irresistible. When he kissed her cheek good night, his lips met with a wet spot of tears.
“Don’t do anything stupid until I get back.” Bucky kissed her forehead and rubbed the top of her head.

“How can I? You’re talking all the stupid with you.” She forced herself to smile. He forced himself to laugh.

“Punk.” He whispered in her ear.

“Jerk.” She murmured before they engaged in one last goodbye kiss. She balled her hands into fists in the pockets of her coat as she watched him get on the boat. She would have joined the crowds of women waving their men off with damp handkerchiefs, but she’d rather not risk getting squashed in the frenzy. She watched the boat until it disappeared into the horizon.

Within the next couple of hours, she was sitting patiently in the doctor’s office of the recruitment center. Directly in front of her was that poster again, the one of the gorgeous buxom woman who looked like she owned the world. It was enough to make Stephanie’s cheeks burn. Her desire of the woman almost eclipsed her envy. If the Army was so desperate that they drafted her husband, why wouldn’t they just take her as a volunteer? She could feel that the examination didn’t go well, especially because she failed to hold in her ugly coughing.

As she was putting on her shoes, one of the guards stepped in and stood at attention for the man about to enter. She automatically put her foot down and smoothed her skirt at the prospect of company. An older balding white-coated doctor entered and started fingering through her file.

“So, you want to go overseas and fight for your husband?” His thick accent made it difficult to tell if he was being condescending.

“Excuse me?” She couldn’t tell what he was assuming about her.

The older gentlemen walked up to her and held out his hand politely, “Dr. Abraham Erskine. I represent the Strategic Scientific Reserve.”

“Stephanie Barnes.” She shook his hand hesitantly. Scientific? She studied art, and nowhere on that form did she say anything about wanting to work in the science department. Also, she couldn’t help but be curious about that accent, “Where are you from?”

“Queens. 73rd Street and Utopia Parkway…” Erskine had been asked that more than enough, knowing exactly why they asked, “…Before that, Germany. This troubles you?”

“No.” She shook her head; that was her first guess after all.


Shit, she’d been caught, just like Bucky said. If she went to prison the same night that Bucky left for Europe, it would be a disaster. Not only would he be terrified for her, but she blew any chance of him ever trusting her to be on her own ever again. Then there was when she actually got to prison. Lecherous prison guards, women twice her size who could break her in two…

“That might not be the right file.” She jumped to interrupt him, trying to play it off as a simple clerical error.
“It’s not the exams I’m interested in. It’s the five tries.” The German doctor was calm and patient with her, “But you didn’t answer my question. Do you want to fight for your husband?”

She instantly erased the whole prison scenario from her worries, but that didn’t make her less nervous, “…Is this a test?”

“Yes.”

She wanted to give an answer that would please him, but she didn’t want to be insincere or corny. For some reason, the question reminded her of the ones she got when she first married Bucky. All her peers thought it was funny that someone actually chose to marry pathetic and rowdy little Stephanie. It was a joke to them that the girl who wore clothes made for little boys and jumped on guys’ backs like a monkey was now a housewife. It was like the ideas of being married to someone she loved and not taking anyone’s shit were somehow incompatible.

“I fight because I don’t like bullies. It has nothing to do with how much I love my husband.”

“Well, there are already so many big people fighting this war, maybe what we need now is a little lady.” He smiled at her, impressed with her spirit, “I can offer you a chance. But only a chance”

Stephanie’s heart fluttered, and she felt lightheaded. This was the other thing Bucky said.

“I’ll take it!” She gleefully exclaimed as she followed behind him like an eager puppy.

“So where is the little lady from, actually?” Dr. Erskine asked as he looked through her papers once more.

“Brooklyn.” She proudly declared.

“Congratulations, soldier.” He handed her the freshly stamped file, which she handled delicately with tears in her eyes as if she were holding her own child. With this chance, her life could finally go somewhere.
Camp Lehigh

Stephanie wanted to pack everything she owned, but stuck to the basic necessities: clothes, notebooks, envelopes, stamps, pencils, the picture of her and Bucky at Coney Island, and toiletries. She couldn’t even remember the last time she left New York, and now she was being shipped off to New Jersey for basic training. Dr. Erskine explained to her that he was enlisting her as a candidate for the Strategic Scientific Reserve’s “Project Rebirth” and that she would be the only female under consideration. Since those funding the experiment were looking to create an army of super soldiers, they were mainly looking for male candidates. However, Erskine had only recently convinced them to allow for a woman to be considered. After all, this was only a test run, and should the experiment be successful and transform a woman into something superior, then, as the investors would assume, it would almost certainly transform men into something more superior.

On the first day of training, she was surrounded by men who were all at least a foot taller than her. While they cracked jokes and chatted amongst themselves and snickered at her, she stood completely still and focused. This was her only shot, and she wasn’t going to ruin it by getting into a fight, no matter how tempting it was.

“Recruits, attention!” A stern female British voice caught her off-guard, and then it was like the lady from the recruitment poster strolled right off the paper and directly in front of them, “Gentlemen, I’m Agent Carter. I supervise all operations for this division.”
Steph took deep silent breaths to calm her throbbing heart. This tall and gorgeous woman had not even made eye contact with her yet, and she felt a burning need to impress her. If Stephanie was chosen, she’d hope that whatever they did would make her more like Agent Carter, poised, graceful, and with an air of authority.

“What’s with the accent, Queen Victoria? I thought I was signing up for the US Army.” One of the men down the line rudely quipped, making Stephanie’s cheek turn red with second-hand embarrassment and fuming anger.

“What’s your name, soldier?” Agent Carter calmly asked.

“Gilmore Hodge, your majesty.”

“Step forward, Hodge.” She quickly demanded, and he quickly obeyed.

“Put your right foot forward.” She ordered, not sounding offended, but definitely not sounding amused.

“Oo, we gonna rassle?” This guy really didn’t know when to stop, and it was making it harder for Stephanie to keep her composure as she stared at the impending storm, “Because I got a few movies I know you’ll like.”

When Hodge winked at her, he was as good as dead. Agent Carter knocked him to the ground in one square punch, and Stephanie had to remind herself that she was already happily married, but open to making new lady friends, not that this woman would have any reason to associate herself with a little gal like herself.

Immediately after the little scandal, Colonel Phillips and Dr. Erskine pulled up to inspect the batch of hopeful candidates, “Agent Carter I see you are breaking in the new candidates, that’s good.”

Phillips spotted Hodge on the ground, “Get your ass up out of that dirt and stand in line at attention until someone comes and tells you what to do.”
Colonel Phillips paced in front of them, “General Patton has said that wars are fought with weapons but they are won by men,” he stepped towards the end of the line where Stephanie had tucked herself, “We are going to win this war because we have the best…” and then finally spotted her, the little lady with short messy hair cut just above the collar of the smallest uniform they could issue, “…men. And they are going to get better…much better.”

The whole week, Stephanie was pitted against the men to compete for the chance to become the first of what they described as a “new breed.” She was very spry for the beginning of each challenge, whether it be running laps, or the obstacle course, but she lacked the fitness to keep up with everyone once she used up all her energy. She was always the last to complete every challenge, but to keep her spirits up, she prided herself on how she managed to complete them at all. She wasn’t going to give up, especially with so many rooting for her to fail. She was used to a little teasing now and then back home, but many of the other guys seemed to make it their mission to make her pack up and go home. Hodge was the worst. When she crawled under the barbed wire, he kicked the support beam which caused one side to almost fall on her. Luckily she was small enough to crawl through the tiny space anyway, but not without some scratches from the wire.

Seeing Agent Carter watching her always gave her a second wind. It was the way she stared at her, sympathetic without showing pity. The last thing that Stephanie wanted was for them to go easy on her, after all. If someone picked her up and brushed her off (like Bucky would do if he were there), the other guys would never let her live it down.

“That flag means we’re only at the half-way point.” The drill sergeant yelled during the morning run of the last day before selection, “First man to bring it back to me gets a ride back with Agent Carter.”

Now that was an opportunity that Stephanie couldn’t afford to miss. As a private, she really had no business talking to Agent Carter, even if they were two of the very few women present at Camp Lehigh. She wanted to catch her in the mess hall or in barracks, but she’d always clam up when she spotted her. She had to get that flag.

As all the men pushed and jumped on each other to reach the pole, no one, not even her favorite person, Hodge, could climb up the smooth metal pole to reach the flag.

They had to get it up there somehow. No one climbs the pole to put the flag up, they usually lower the... Stephanie thought to herself until she spotted the bolt at the base of the pole which supported it. Once the drill sergeant told everyone to fall in, the mad scramble find dispersed giving her room to go to the pole herself.

“Barnes! I said fall in!” The drill sergeant shouted, getting especially impatient with her.

When she removed the bolt, the long white pole crashed into the sand. She grabbed her prize and skipped happily to take a seat next to Agent Carter, who was the most pleased of everyone to see the runt outsmart the rest.
“You’re not really thinking about choosing Barnes, are you?” Col. Phillips grumbled as he watched Stephanie’s shaky noodle arms barely lift her off the ground as Agent Carter barked at her.

“I wasn’t just thinking about it. She is the clear choice.” Dr. Erskine adjusted his glasses.

“When you brought that ninety pound asthmatic housewife onto my army base, I let it slide. I thought, what the hell, maybe she’d be useful to you and give Carter some company, like a pet gerbil. I never thought you’d actually pick her.” Col. Phillips shook his head at her, “We’re supposed to be making soldiers, not pin-up girls.”

“As I told you already, if the serum works for her, it’ll definitely work on every man here.”

“Might as well give it to Carter, then. At least she can throw a punch without knocking the wind out of her.”

“I already asked Agent Carter, and she responded that she’s ‘not interested in being a lab rat.’”

“You stick a needle in that kid’s arm it’s going to go right through her.” He sighed as Stephanie lost her breath over jumping jacks, “Look at that. She’s making me cry.”

“I am looking for qualities beyond the physical.” Erskine explained once more.

“Do you know how long it took me to set up this project? The groveling I had to do at Senator Whatshisname’s committee?”

“I know. I am well aware of your efforts.”

“Then throw me a bone.” Col. Phillips gestured towards his desired candidate, “Hodge passed every test we gave him. He’s big, he’s fast, he obeys orders. He’s a soldier.”

“He’s a bully.” The good doctor stated bluntly.

“You don’t win wars with niceness, Doctor.” Col. Phillips snarled and reached for a dummy grenade and pulled the pin, “You win wars…with guts.”

He tossed it directly into the rows of men, only for it to roll right past Hodge, who immediately dodged it and ordered the rest of the men to move, and directly in front of Stephanie, who instinctively jumped towards it and rolled herself around it.

“Get away!” She screamed at everyone, ready to take whatever blow was coming, “Get back!”

However, nothing happened. She looked around to see everyone staring at her, some with admiration, and some who rolled their eyes at her for not realizing it was a dummy. When she gazed up, she saw Agent Carter standing right in front of her, subtly smiling at her. She wasn’t sure whether to be embarrassed or excited.

“Is…this a test?” Steph asked, trying to not to blush.

The doctor raised his eyebrows at the colonel, who only walked away mumbling, “…She’s still skinny.”
A Good Woman

When Dr. Erskine chose Stephanie, she almost leapt into his arms and kissed him. Instead, she just shook his hand wildly with a small tear in her eye and a wide grin as she thanked him profusely. That night, as she waited eagerly for morning, she ran her fingers over her framed picture of her and Bucky. She still hadn’t told him a thing. If he knew what she’d gotten herself into, he’d go AWOL just to find her and tell her how dangerous this was. She rubbed his chin in the picture. He’d only be informed if something terrible happened, but if everything went as planned, he wouldn’t have to find out until he came home to the pleasant surprise of a superhuman wife.

Erskine knocked, “Mrs. Barnes, are you decent?”

“Yeah, come on in.” She answered once she put a robe on over her sleeping clothes.

The good doctor came in with a bottle and two glasses, “Couldn’t sleep?”

“I got the jitters, I guess.” She laughed awkwardly and pulled her hair behind her ear.

“Me, too.” Dr. Erskine took a seat on the empty bed next to her.

“Can I ask you a question?” She shuffled her hands nervously.

“Just one?”

“Well, a couple of questions.” She started playing with a strand of her hair. Dr. Erskine nodded and held his hand out, ready to listen.

“Why me?” She asked, trying not to sound ungrateful or like she was backing out. She had worked so hard for this, and it was just so strange to win something for once.

“I suppose that’s an important question…” Dr. Erskine pondered. He looked away like he had long speech ahead of him. He twirled the bottle of schnapps in his hand, “This is from Augsburg, my city. So many people forget that the first country the Nazis invaded was their own.”

Stephanie squeezed the fabric of her gown, already feeling the chills from this Schmidt guy. He sounds like a real nut.

“Did it make him stronger?” Stephanie imagined every bully who had ever cornered her in an alley suddenly getting bigger and scarier than before.
“Ja, but there were other…effects. The serum was not ready, but more important, the man. The serum amplifies everything that is inside, so good becomes great. Bad becomes worse.”

Stephanie’s eyes widened. What would it mean for her to be changed from the inside? Would she still be the same person?

“This is why you were chosen. Because a strong person, who has known power all their life may lose respect for that power, but a weak person knows the value of that strength, and knows compassion.”

Stephanie smiled even if she was a little put off by being called weak, but he put it nicer than anyone else ever did, “Thanks, I think.”

“Was that all you had to ask?”

“Oh! No, I…um…” She fumbled around with her next question, as it was a lot more personal, “I want to know if this serum is going to…have any effects on my...ability to have children.”

“Oh, well it won’t make you sterile, I can promise you that.” Dr. Erskine shook his head and smiled kindly.

“That’s good, but I also…” She took a deep breath and her throat croaked as she tried to find the words.

“It’s alright, you can ask me anything.” He put a reassuring hand on hers for a brief moment.

“Well, my husband and I have wanted kids for a while, but...apparently, I’m not strong enough to have them. It’s not the conception that’s the problem, well it is a little, but mainly it’s just the…” Stephanie gestured out a womb, “…and I got some heart issues that get in the way, and my blood pressure I’ve been told is also a problem…and…I just want to know if this serum will fix any of that…or all of that preferably?” She bit her lip eagerly.

“I see. Well, if the serum works as it should, then your health concerns will no longer be a problem. You should be able to do everything a healthy person can do, or ever better, including have children. Even if, God forbid, it doesn’t turn out that way, I’m sure I can do something to help you bear children.” Dr. Erskine explained.

“Oh thank you, doctor!” She didn’t hold back from hugging him this time. He patted her back and then pointed to the glasses he brought so he could serve the drinks.

“Whatsoever happens tomorrow, you must promise me one thing: that you will stay who you are, not a perfect soldier, but a good woman.” Erskine poured the drinks and handed one to her.

“To the little ones.” She gave a half smile as she clinked her glass with his. As she put the drink to her lips, Dr. Erskine suddenly pulled it away from her.

“No, wait, wait! What am I doing? No, you have procedure tomorrow! No fluids.” He took the schnapps and poured it into his own glass.

“Alright, we’ll drink it after.” She swung her feet on the bed, giggling.

“No, I don’t have procedure tomorrow. Drink it after, I’ll drink it now.”
“I know this neighborhood.” Stephanie tried to break the silence with Agent Carter, but she didn’t even turn her head, “…I got beat up in that alley.”

Peggy’s neck twisted so fast, it almost popped, “What?”

“And in that parking lot...” Stephanie added, unable to hold back a small smile, “…and behind that diner.”

“That’s horrid. By other girls?” Peggy was shocked that someone would dare try to injure what she had taken to be a little ball of excitable sunshine.

“No, by guys who were just a little tired of my big mouth.” Stephanie chuckled, trying to lighten the mood. Peggy looked like she’d just been informed of an atrocity; she hadn’t expected her to be that horrified, “It wasn’t that bad, don’t worry.”

“Did you ever run away?” Peggy tried to go back to her usual composure, but she was still disturbed.

“If you start running, they’ll never let you stop.” Stephanie explained, “You stand up, push back. I can say no, but that doesn’t mean they’ll listen.”

Peggy nodded sympathetically, “I know a little of what’s that like, to have every door shut in your face, but not before they hit your bottom on the way out.”

“You? But you’re in the army, and you’re tall and you’re beautiful and you’re…” Steph blushed when she realized what she just spurted out, “You punched Private Hodge in the face. That was… something.”

“Well I outrank him.” Peggy hide a smile herself, “Of course I still have my superiors to answer to, and that’s not always fun.”

“Colonel Phillips seems to trust you.” Steph loosened her grip, letting her hand sit next to Agent Carter’s instead of keeping it tightly balled in her skirt.

“Now he does. That took time.” Peggy caught herself chatting with Mrs. Barnes more than she expected, and she turned her head more towards the window. Sure, she was friendly and clever and had an adorable smile, but part of her was still perplexed by how this woman signed up to be a lab rat to an experiment Peggy herself rejected.

“Heh, you know this is probably the longest conversation I had with another woman?” Stephanie scratched the back of her neck, awkwardly trying to think of more things to say.

“Are you serious?” Peggy looked back, hooked once again, “I thought wives formed little circles amongst themselves.”

“They do, but they conveniently leave me out on most things. It’s for the best really, I don’t like people telling me how to do my job.” Steph wrinkled her nose.

“So you decided to become a soldier?” Peggy raised an eyebrow.

“Well, that’s…it’s different. That’s people telling me how to do more, and I…I like that. It’s more than just staying at home like Bucky wanted me to…” Steph realized how that sounded and noticed
Peggy’s souring expression and tried to backtrack herself, “Not that he’s…Bucky is a great guy. He’s so wonderful. He just doesn’t want me to get hurt, you know? Like he turns around and he sees my ass getting thrown in the dumpster, and he panics. It’s been like that ever since we were kids.”

“He sounds lovely.” Peggy nodded politely, although she really wanted to meet Mr. Barnes for herself before she made any real judgments.

“What can I say?” Stephanie pulled her hair behind ear and blushed, “He’s the right partner.”

When they pulled up to an antique shop, Peggy led them inside and answered a coded question with a coded passphrase. A secret hallway opened that led them to where the experiment would be performed. Staring eyes directed at Steph made her avert every gaze and walk faster. Agent Carter couldn’t help but be surprised at how the talkative woman she just got to know in the car had suddenly grown shy and closed off. Sadly, she could guess why. Everyone was staring at her like the “before” picture in one of those ads for beauty and health products. Everyone here today was hoping that today would be the day she’s “fixed,” and she was almost certain it wasn’t her asthma they were concerned about. As she walked alongside her, Peggy frowned, suddenly uncomfortable with the idea of changing one hair on her friend’s head, but when they actually reached the laboratory with the small crowd of scientists and senators and reporters, Stephanie grew excited again, as well as nervous.

“Good morning.” Dr. Erskine kindly greeted her with a friendly handshake, which was interrupted by an overenthusiastic photographer, which the doctor shooed off with a firm, “Please, not now.”

Dr. Erskine held Stephanie’s hand more firmly in his grip and smiled, “Are you ready?”

Stephanie grinned as hard as she could and nodded her head wildly.

“Good, now I’m going to need you to undress, alright?” Dr. Erskine explained, knowing how embarrassing it must be for her to disrobe for such an audience, but they were all (supposedly) professionals who understood this as necessary for science. Stephanie took a deep breath, shrugging before she removed her hat and tie followed by her shirt and skirt. As she stood there in her underwear, Dr. Erskine awkwardly gestured that her bra would have to be removed as well. Stephanie blushed and looked to Peggy for sympathy or comfort as she unhooked and slipped off her satin brassiere. Peggy gave her a subtle bite of her lower lip.

As soon as she was properly undressed, Steph climbed into the Vita-Ray machine and let the scientists strap her in securely.

“Jesus, somebody get that girl a sandwich.” She barely heard the echo of someone from above.

“Comfortable?” Dr. Erskine asked.

“It’s a little big,” Steph remarked, “You save me any of that schnapps?”

“Not as much as I should have.” Dr. Erskine shook his head, “Sorry, next time.”

It wasn’t until she was already strapped in that she saw the Howard Stark manning the controls. She would’ve told him how she loved his presentation at the Science Expo, but she didn’t want to do so while she was topless, especially since he had a reputation.

“Mr. Stark, how are your levels?”

“Level’s at 100%”
“Good.”

“We may dim half the lights in Brooklyn,” Howard crossed over to where he could see Stephanie, hands relaxed in his pockets. He looked enamored in her direction, but whether it was at her or at his sleek machine, it wasn’t certain, “But we’re ready. Good as we’ll ever be.”

“Agent Carter, don’t you think you’d be more comfortable in the booth?” Dr. Erskine caught Peggy inching closer to the machine.

“Oh, ah yes, sorry.” She gave Stephanie one last sympathetic look before going up the stairs.

“Ladies and gentlemen, today we take not another step towards annihilation, but the first step towards the path to peace.” Dr. Erskine announced to the audience as the nurses lowered the injection pads onto Stephanie’s chest.

“We begin with a series of microinjections into the subject’s major muscles. The serum infusion will cause immediate cellular change. Then to stimulate growth, the subject will be saturated with Vita rays.”

The nurse stuck Stephanie with a long needle that made her scrunch her face up tightly, “That wasn’t so bad.”

“That was penicillin.” Dr. Erskine sighed briefly, “Serum infusion, beginning in five…four…..” He put an encouraging hand on her shoulder, “three…two…one.”

With that, the many tubes of blue liquid emptied themselves into Steph’s body, sending the serum painfully rushing through her muscles, which she suffered silently. She felt like she was going to explode, her organs busting out and flying all over the laboratory.

“Now, Mr. Stark.”
The casing closed around her, trapping her in a metal cocoon. She still had light coming from the window, but she wasn’t tall enough to see out of it.

“Mrs. Barnes, can you hear me?”

“Probably too late to go to the bathroom, right?” Steph smiled as she shivered. If those were her famous last words, she would be satisfied.

“We will proceed.” Dr. Erskine smiled.

Howard put on his safety goggles and turned the wheel. As he started counting up the percentages, the machine whirred and buzzed louder. Inside the machine, Stephanie started to sweat as it heated up. At first it was just a warm sensation, but as she could feel her muscles stretch and inflate, she felt as if she was being cooked alive. Her back stretched out like taffy. Her heart pumped lava into her vessels. Even her skin was stinging like hot oil was raining on her. She didn’t want to struggle and possible damage a gear in the machine, but she finally had no choice but to scream all the pain out of system.

She could hear Dr. Erskine calling her name and Agent Carter shouting at Howard to stop the machine, but she was so close. It wouldn’t do anything to turn back now.

“No, don’t!” She hollered, “I can do this!”

She tried to focus on something else to get through this. She imagined the burning in her stomach as she opened her acceptance letter to art school. If she couldn’t be a poster girl, she was going to make the poster girls. She was going to make political cartoons that weren’t afraid to say what needed to be said. She was going to animate the cartoons before movies that taught kids good lessons. That stint in art school didn’t go as great as she hoped, but her mother told her not to be discouraged. She told her that life had many unexpected surprises. This was probably not what she had in mind, though.

Finally, the machine’s humming died down, and everything went cold and dark. Stephanie tried to control her breathing, but she found she could take in more air than she was used to. Finally, Dr. Erskine called for Howard to open the machine. Then panels withdrew and revealed the fruits of their labor. Stephanie’s new body emerged, covered in sweat and stretching her skirt to the furthest it could. She panted as she took in the cool air and shivered. Dr. Erskine and Howard immediately rushed over to her and grabbed her by the shoulders to help her on her feet.

“We did it…” She whispered joyfully, trying to find her new center of gravity.

“Yes, we did it.” Dr. Erskine proudly beamed.

“You actually did it.” Howard looked up and down, and shamelessly lingered on her newly developed chest. Steph would’ve told him off if she wasn’t so busy staring at it herself. Peggy rushed down as soon as she had grabbed a sheet from the lab supplies to cover her with.

“How do you feel?” Peggy felt guilty for staring as well, but it truly shocking to see the little lady suddenly transform into a woman larger than even her.

“Taller…” Stephanie still panted, suddenly seeing the top of people’s heads. She felt like she was standing on a table, and when she breathed, she felt the unfamiliar pull of gravity on her chest, “…and…heavier.”
“Um…” Peggy couldn’t help but feel the soft new flesh with her finger tips as she pressed a cotton white bra into her, “You look taller….Try this on for size.”

Stephanie was too amazed to feel indecent. She was tall, she had curves, she had biceps, and she even had calves! It took a few minutes before it actually started to feel like her real body. The clothes that Peggy gave her were a little snug, which was a first. Everyone swarming around her smiling and trying to shake her hand unsettled her. Everything was a little too euphoric, and a few seconds later, her gut feelings proved her right. An explosion sent everyone into a scramble, and then gun shots fired and she watched in horror as they hit Dr. Erskine.

“Stop him!” Someone shouted as the murder ran off with the last sample of the serum, and Peggy took off after him.

Stephanie ran over to Dr. Erskine’s body bleeding out on the floor, eyes welling with tears, but nothing to say. He had just given her everything, and she couldn’t do anything to save him. He couldn’t form words either, but with his dying breath, he tapped on her heart. Not a perfect soldier, but a good woman. She kissed his forehead and whispered a final thank you before setting out for what she had to do.

She ran out of the building, adjusting to her new body, only to find Peggy shooting directly at a yellow cab that was about to collide with her. Stephanie ran head on into Peggy to knock her out of the way, only to be rebuked with a frustrated, “I had him!”

Stephanie struggled back to her feet and gave an exasperated apology before charging towards the car herself. She would’ve been impressed with her new speed if she wasn’t preoccupied with catching the good doctor’s murderer. She soon realized that stopping herself and changing direction was now much harder than it used to be, and she ended up running throw the window display of a bridal shop. She apologized profusely while still keeping the yellow cab locked into her sight. She leapt over a metal fence in her path without even touching the wire. As it navigated through traffic, she figured if she could jump a fence, she could jump cars. She leapt from hood to hood over the traffic until she landed right on top of the cab, clutching to it for dear life as it tried to swerve her off. When she clearly wasn’t going to let go, he started shooting through the roof which knocked her to the side of the car, where she barely managed to avoid being shot. Fortunately however, that took his focus off of the road long enough for him to crash. She let go just before the cab rolled in circles, losing one of its doors.

She finally saw the guy’s face, sweaty and with gritted teeth, and focused. She managed to use the broken door as a shield as he shot at her before running towards the water and taking a child hostage with him. The screaming and begging mother fueled Stephanie’s drive to follow him even if she could get shot. She hid behind every obstacle in her path when he aimed at her, and almost got hit a few times.

When she turned the corner and found him aiming directly at the child’s head, she shouted firmly, “No don’t!”

Suddenly, the gun was aimed at her and the trigger clicked. By a miracle, it was jammed, but the angered fiend threw the child into the water. Instinctively, she ran to the boy, but when he assured her he could swim, she went right back on track to catching the murderer. She found him riding off in a submarine of sorts, but didn’t lose her focus. She dived into the water and stroked with her powerful new limbs to catch up with him and force him out of the cockpit, dragging him to shore with her.

When he tried to punch her, she evaded and kicked him in the face, sending him flying back and the serum out of pocket and shattering on the ground.
She grabbed him by the shirt and screamed, “Who are you?!”

“The first of many. Cut off one head…” he responded while biting down on a capsule hidden in his teeth, “…two more shall take its place…” he grunted as he foamed at the mouth and convulsed, “…Hail Hydra.”

It burned her that he escaped justice like a coward, and his final words just confused her. Whoever or whatever Hydra was, they took her friend, and she would never forget nor forgive.
Peggy soon arrived on the scene to take Stephanie back to the SSR headquarters while other agents disposed of the spy’s body. Once the adrenaline died down, Stephanie silently cried as she stared out the window, looking away from Peggy. Peggy, however, could hear the shaking in her breath, and took her hand, “You did everything you could. There is no way you could have seen this coming.”

Stephanie had only known the man for a few weeks at most, but he was just filled with so much compassion and hope, for her of all people. She watched him tell Col. Phillips and Senator Brandt that she was the guinea pig for the serum, and that they had no plans for her after the trial run, but she knew that he actually wanted something for her. She didn’t know what that was exactly, but whatever it was, it was supposed to be great.

Once they returned to base, Stephanie was thrown right back into the frenzy that was people gawking at her body. They wanted touch it to see if it was real. Even the nurses poked and prodded more than they should have when running tests on her.

“You think you got enough?” She murmured to the nurse who took eight or nine vials of her blood, which would have made her pass out if it was taken earlier that day.

“Any hope of reproducing the program is locked in your genetic code.” Peggy explained calmly, “but without Dr. Erskine, it would take years.”

Locked in her genetic code, did that mean it could be replicated in her children? Children that she was only able to have thanks to his work? Until that happened, she couldn’t know. He could never tell her anything ever again.

“He deserved more than this.” Her throat felt the crying lump again but she swallowed it down.

“If it could work only once, he’d be proud it was you.” Peggy shuffled the files uncomfortably, but it looked like it was more than out of grief.

“Agent Carter…” Stephanie bit her lip, preparing for an awkward answer, “I overheard…that you were considered for the serum…but you said no. Can I ask why?”

“That’s a bold question, Private Barnes.” Agent Carter’s gaze met her stomach before rising to her eyes, since she was still getting used to the fact that she was no longer taller than her, “I suppose I just had nothing to gain from it. Nothing worth the risk, at least.”

“Were you afraid you were going to turn into a big ugly monster or something?” Stephanie tried to jest some good spirits back into herself, but when Peggy walked away, she played back what she said in her head and smacked herself for saying something so stupid.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. You’d be a gorgeous monster!” Stephanie followed behind her, not realizing that Peggy was hiding a smile behind her paperwork.

“Is this why the other housewives don’t talk to you, Barnes?” She showed her sly smile with her reciprocate joke.

“And because I make the mimosas too strong.” Stephanie smiled back at her.

“You know, since the machine didn’t fry you, you have to tell your husband about all this.”
“Mm, I think I’ll wait until the time is right.”

“Do you think he’ll be displeased?”

“He’ll forgive me.”

The women walked to meet Col. Phillips, who was explaining to Senator Brandt that the man who killed Dr. Erskine worked for Hydra.

“Hydra is the Nazi deep science division. It’s led by Johann Schmidt.” Peggy explained as she walked in, “but he has much bigger ambitions.”

Schmidt…Hydra…finally it clicked in Stephanie’s head that the murderer worked for the man who took the serum before her. Of course Schmidt would hold a grudge against the doctor, now things were finally starting to come together. She wanted in on this fight against Hydra.

“Hydra’s practically a cult. They worship Schmidt. They think he’s invincible.” Col. Phillips further explained.

“So what are you gonna do about it?” Senator Brandt asked impatiently.

“Spoke to the President this morning. As of today, the SSR is being retasked.” Col. Phillips turned to Agent Carter.

“Colonel?” She responded curiously.

“We are taking the fight to Hydra. Pack your bags, Agent Carter,” Col. Phillips ordered, “You too, Stark! We’re flying to London, tonight.”

“Sir!” Stephanie piped up just enough to get his attention, “If you’re going after Schmidt, I want in.”

Col. Phillips scoffed at the suggestion, “You’re an experiment. You’re going to Alamogordo.”

“The serum worked.” She grounded her feet into the floor and firmly argued.

“I asked for an army, and I all I got was you.” He looked straight into her furious eyes, “You are not what I asked for.”

Stephanie swallowed down another lump in her throat, and Peggy took a deep breath, like she was also hit by the Colonel’s words. Still, neither of them had the authority to say anything else to him, and he walked away to plan his attacks on Hydra.

Senator Brandt, however, walked up to her with sympathy in his eyes, “Will all due respect to the Colonel, I think we may be missing the point. I’ve seen you in action, Mrs. Barnes. More importantly, the country’s seen it.”

Stephanie’s eyes widened, and when the Senator called for a newspaper, she saw the headline, “Nazis in New York. Mystery Woman Saves Child.” She blushed. She had been so focused on chasing the guy, that she had honestly forgotten that people were watching her.

“Enlistment lines have been around the block since your picture hit the newsstands.” Senator Brandt smiled, “You don’t take a girl, a symbol like that, and hide her in a lab.”

Stephanie covered her mouth in shock. People enlisting just from seeing her in the paper?

“Ma’am,” Senator Brandt wrapped his arm around her shoulder, “Do you want to serve your country
“on the most important battlefield of the war?”

“Sir,” her eyes glistened with excitement, “that’s all I want.”

“Then congratulations,” He shook her hand, “You just got promoted.”
Sergeant Sweetheart

It wasn’t the gig or even the costume that made her uncomfortable. After all, they gave her a say in her outfit. Their first idea was a tight blue one-piece with a short red and white peplum.

“Um, it fits, but are there going to be small children in the audience? I was kind of thinking of something more family friendly.” She pulled out her wedgie.

“We’re selling the bonds to the dads, not the kids.” Her short and stubby new boss, Richie, pulled the fat cigar out of his mouth.

“Well how am I supposed to become a household name if I’m too risqué for the house?” She was willing to fight him on this. She wasn’t going on tour for months in an outfit she didn’t love.

“You have to look sexy, that is a must.” He asserted.

“I know. I can do sexy, but this is too much. It’s the USO, not Las Vegas.” She rubbed over her exposed cleavage.

“Sheesh.”

After a few more tries, Stephanie made it clear that she was going for tight, but tasteful. Cleavage was out of the question, but showing arms and legs was fine in her book. She finally settled on something fun and cutesy, but still a little bit suggestive. The sleeveless turtleneck halter top made a triangle around her torso with a white star in the center and red and white stripes around her waist. Her miniskirt was as blue as the top, and her knee high boots were as red as her lipstick. After her hair and make-up team fixed her hair into bouncy curls that rested on her shoulders even under her aviator goggles and added a nice contour to her cheeks, she look at herself in the mirror in her full getup and felt…unreal.

She beamed big enough and thanked them so much for their hard work. She finally looked like “The Girl with the Star-Spangled Heart” from the posters, but she didn’t feel like one. Agent Carter had the look and the walk and the talk and the overall aura. Stephanie didn’t have any grace, even in more comfortable shoes. She could pose and smile for photo shoots, and the photographers encouraged her, telling her she had that “natural” charm, but what about when she actually had to go on stage as Captain America, the Star-Spangled Gal? She did some theatre in college, but she was a part of the ensemble, not the star! Rehearsals went okay, but not great. Richie insisted that everything would come together on opening night. The USO girls who had experience tsked and shook their head. Nothing goes right on opening night.

And it didn’t. Two girls from the left flank of the dance crew got sick that morning, and a girl from the right flank had to switch over to keep the balance. The air conditioning was broken, so everyone was trying to keep the sweat from ruining their makeup. With all this other ruckus going on, Stephanie didn’t want to lay her anxiety about the performance on anybody, so before they put on her make-up, she cried out her nerves in a private toilet room, and didn’t come out until her red eyes cleared up. That actually helped out so much more than she expected it would. When she flushed her tears down the toilet, she could feel her long lost optimism fall back into place. She was going to be gorgeous, and she was going to knock this out of the park. When her hair and make-up girls finished their handiwork, she kissed them each on the cheek.

“You ready?” Richie waited for her backstage.
“I think I can do this.” She nodded.

“Good. Just sell a few bonds, bonds buy bullets, bullets kill Nazis. Bing, bang, boom.” He smacked the small of her back, just above her tush, “You’re an American hero.”

“I have to admit, this is not how I pictured getting here.” Stephanie adjusted her goggles and her miniskirt.

“The senator’s got a lot of pull up on the hill. You play ball with us; you’ll be up with the WAC in Europe, for sure.” He reminded her, “Take the shield, go.”

She ran through the curtains on cue, which prompted the USO girls to start singing.

*Who’s strong and brave, here to save the American way?*

“Not all of us can storm a beach or drive a tank.” Stephanie scanned the crowd, and there sure were a lot of children in audience, just as she suspected, “But there’s still a way all of us can fight.”

*Who vows to fight like a man for what’s right night and day?*

“Series E Defense bonds. Each one you buy is a bullet in the barrel of your best guy’s gun!” She smiled brightly, and shook her hips a little.

*Who will campaign door-to-door for America?*

*Carry the flag shore to shore for America?*

*From Hoboken to Spokane,*

*The Star-Spangled Gal, Your New Pal!*

After her routine, a funny guy named Bill dressed as Hitler and would sneak up behind her. The children screamed to warn her. It amused her how serious they were, so she played along with them.

“Who? Where? *Behind* me?”

At the clash of a cymbal, she’d stage punch him off his feet, to the roaring applause of everyone.

The meet and greet was more exhilarating than the show itself. Richie told her to give every gentleman a quick peck on the cheek, so she decided she’d make it fair and kiss the women and the children, too. She lit up stunningly every time a beautiful mother with an adorable baby came up to her. She loved to hold the babies for pictures, and it was a challenge to get her to let go.

She quickly grew in popularity, with more and more cities booking her during the tour. The longer it went on, the more she got used to it. She still didn’t feel like a pageant queen, but if she inspired people to do more, that’s all that mattered. She did a few movies and TV appearances, which broadened her audience. They even started printing comics of her, which became popular with little girls and older boys. The writers were a nice couple of Jewish men who asked her for parts of her real story to put in the origin issue. They disagreed with each other on how to represent Bucky, especially since he wasn’t really available to give permission on his name and likeness. They decided to keep their marriage ambiguous, with Stephanie only referring to his unseen character as “Sgt. Sweetheart” and her “beloved” overseas. They avoided salutations like “Miss” or “Mrs” which would spoil the secret, so everyone referred to her as “Captain” or “ma’am.” She always wore gloves to hide her ring.
“When he comes back and gives us the okay, we’ll do a big reveal special.” They told her during their coffee break, in the scattered mess of crumpled papers and character designs tacked to the wall.

“Thank you so much, Mr. Kirby, Mr. Simon.” She giggled, “I’m sure he’ll be a hit. He’s a looker, and a charmer.”

After she toured every state in the US, she was sent overseas to boost the morale of the troops in Europe. Her stop in Italy was turning very rough, since these tired and hungry men didn’t have their families around to keep their manners in check.

“Woah baby! Gimme a piece of that!” She heard one catcall among the whistles and hollers, which made her more nervous.

“Ahem, How many of you are ready to help me sock ol’ Adolf on the jaw?” She kept her toothy smile bright. The crowds did not calm down in the slightest. She knew her next line wasn’t going to help her situation, but she had to say it anyway.

“I need a volunteer.” She straightened her posture and pursed her lips at the loud “oohs” and the laughter, “C’mon guys, you know what I mean.”

“I volunteer to suck those tits!”

“C’mon, baby! Turn around!”

“Nice boots, Tinkerbell!” Now that voice sounded more familiar. When she peered into the crowd, she saw it was her secret lover, Hodge.

“That’s lovely. You’re all lovely.” She smirked, “C’mon guys, we’re all on the same team here.”

“You know you want this.” One soldier flashed his ass, to the laughter of the crowd. When it was clear that she wasn’t going to play along, they demanded the dancers back.

“I think they only know the one song,” She stammered, “But I’ll see what I can do.”

“You do that, sweetheart!”

“Hey! That’s Captain to you, sir!” Her cheek turned red. It wasn’t too long before the audience turned more hostile and old fruit came flying at her. She hid behind the shield as she scurried off stage and the dancers took her place, and they were much more experienced at satisfying this kind of audience.

“You did good, don’t worry.” Richie patted her back as she stomped down the stairs, “They like you, they just have a harsh way of showing it.”

She needed some alone time to collect herself. If every show was going to be like this from now on, she didn’t know if she could do it. What did she expect? Didn’t she realize she was signing up to be a sex symbol? Still, that didn’t mean she had to put up with that. She missed the family audiences back home, they were more her style.

When it started raining, the crowds and crew dispersed, and she was left in peace on the stairs of the stage. She gathered her pencils and sketched herself in two forms, the child-friendly hero that was seen on TV every week, and the pin-up vixen that was made for men’s magazines. Two extremes, and with every performance, she had to choose one or the other. She couldn’t be both at the same time.
“Hello, Stephanie.” She heard a familiar pleasant voice chirp. She jolted and turned around in surprise, dropping her notebook on the dry steps and rushing to hug her friend.

“Peggy!” She exclaimed in her tight squeeze, which startled Peggy a bit.

“Oh, hi.” She chuckled in surprise. She should have expected the warm welcome.

“What are you doing here? How are you? It’s so good to see you, I missed you!” She knew she was overdoing it a little, but she didn’t care. She needed Peggy’s presence to comfort her after that awful attack on her dignity.

“It’s good to see you too, Stephanie. But, officially, I’m not here at all.” She loosened the hug a bit so she could face her, “That was quite a performance.”

“Oh, you saw that?” Stephanie hissed, “I thought I’d be used to a little heckling by now, but I panicked. I had to improvise a little bit. The crowds I’m used to are a little more…twelve.”

“And I understand you’re American’s new hope.” Peggy gave a sly smile.

“Bond sales increase 400% in every state I visit.” Stephanie shrugged.

“Is that Senator Brandt I hear?” Peggy snickered.

“Well, he’s got me doing this.” Stephanie tugged on her skirt, “Phillips would’ve had me stuck in a lab.”

“And these are your only two options?” Peggy said. Sure, Stephanie looked satisfied playing the part of showgirl, but she knew this was the tenacious and clever girl who signed up for the WAC five times, “A lab rat or a dancing monkey? You were meant for more than this you know.”

Stephanie froze, as if Peggy had said something she had been forcing herself to ignore this whole time. She did genuinely like making children laugh and smile, which was one of the main reasons she kept this role. She also did like genuinely helping the cause with the large boost in bond sales. She told herself that she was doing all she could do, but here Peggy was telling her there was still more out there for her. Was she right?

“What?” Peggy touched Steph’s cheek, as her still face remained in thought.

“You know…for the longest time, I dreamed about coming overseas, and being on the front lines… and serving my country. I finally got everything I wanted…and I’m wearing a miniskirt.” Steph smiled to keep herself cheery.

Suddenly, a medical truck pulled up towards the tents, and they heard the orders and the rushing to get the significant amount of wounded men to the nurses and doctors.

“They look like they’ve been through hell.” Steph murmured as she saw the burns and the missing limbs.

“These men more than most, “Peggy sighed, “Schmidt sent out a force to his army. 200 men went up against him, and less than 50 returned. Your audience contained what was left of the 107th.”

No. No, no, no. What was left of the 107th?

“The rest were killed, or capt-“ Peggy stopped when she saw the horror on Steph’s face.
“The 107th?!” Stephanie barked. Bucky was in the 107th but he wasn’t in that audience. Steph’s heart burned a hole in her chest, and she swore it stopped for 5 whole seconds. Peggy’s heart sank as well as she guessed what disturbed her married friend so much. When Stephanie ran back to Col. Phillip’s tent, Peggy followed right by her side.

“Col. Phillips! I—” Stephanie yelled as she zoomed through the flaps of his tent, but she stopped just as soon as she saw him standing there solemnly, with a letter addressed specifically to her.

“Please accept my condolences, Captain Barnes.” He handed the letter to her. Her lips tightened as the flood of tears poured down without even building up in her eyes first. She could feel Peggy frowning deeply behind her. She opened the letter, and grabbed on the thin hope than read MIA instead of KIA.

“So he could still be alive?” She choked out.

“I have signed more of these condolence letters today than I would care to count,” He returned to his cold attitude, “I cannot risk sending the survivors thirty miles behind the lines in some of the most heavily fortified territory in Europe. If he’s alive, we’ll find out when we win the war.”

“You’re not going to send anyone? Send a plane, or a tank, send someone!” She shrieked, noticing the location marked on a map behind the Colonel.

“You don’t get to give me orders, Captain.” He sternly reprimanded her, “I know you’re upset, but you’re not the first wife I’ve had to disappoint, and you’re not the only one who wants her husband home. I have to think of what’s best for the regiment. You’re dismissed. Carter, go with her and console her.”

Peggy pulled Stephanie close to her and lowered her head onto her shoulder, catching the marked map as she led her out of the tent. As soon as they were outside, they looked at each other with the same idea in mind. They were going to rescue Bucky Barnes.
"I’m gonna need better shoes if I’m going out in the field." Stephanie pulled the heel of her boots out of the mud with every step.

"Follow me. I’ll take care of everything." Peggy led her straight to her cabin, where she had spare clothing and a phone. Stephanie changed into a dry pair of socks and combat boots, but didn’t waste time changing out of the rest of her outfit. She also borrowed Peggy’s coat and one of the blue USO girl helmets that was lying around.

"Huh, how did this get here?" She asked, but Peggy brushed off the question since she was on the phone.

"Hello, Stark? Yes, hi, I need a really big favor. I need a plane and a pilot. In three minutes. Off the record. Stephanie’s husband has been captured. Thank you, Howard." Peggy’s voice went soft and grateful at the end. She hung up and turned around, "We take off in two minutes."

"I’m ready. Let’s go!" Stephanie slipped her goggles onto the blue helmet.

"I have longer skirts if you want." Peggy tried not to stare at her bare legs in the mini-skirt.

"No thanks, I think this one is easier to move around in." She jogged in place, "It has more give."

"The Hydra camp is in Krossberg. It’s up between these two mountain ranges. It’s a factory of some kind." Peggy traced the area with her finger on the map.

"We should be able to drop you around the doorstep." Howard said.

"Just get me as close as you can." She shouted over the rushing air and adjusted her parachute pack, "You know you two are going to be in a lot of trouble when you land."

"Don’t worry about us, doll. You have the love of your life to save." Howard smiled.

"Well I doubt true love will save her from the Colonel." Peggy said.

"Where I’m going, if anybody yells at me, I can just shoot them." Steph nervously chuckled to relax her thumping heart.

"They will undoubtedly shoot back." Peggy responded.

"Well let’s hope this is good for something." Steph banged on her shield.

"Agent Carter, if you’re not in too much of a hurry, I thought we could stop off in Usurea for a late night fondue." Howard chirped in with his horrible timing. Stephanie had no idea what that was, but the way he said it made it sound dirty. Was he seriously hitting on her right now? Did he even realize that Stephanie might come out of this a widow? If she even came back at all? She looked at Peggy like she was asking her what this guy’s problem was.

"Stark is the best civilian pilot I’ve ever seen. He’s mad enough to brave this air space. We’re lucky to have him." Peggy explained to Steph while simultaneously reminding herself why she called him.
“So you two…do you…fondue?” Steph misunderstood Peggy’s patience with him as a sort of affection. Was Howard her boyfriend? Was that her type? She honestly felt a little envious. When Colonel Phillips handed her that letter, one of her many thoughts was that if Bucky was truly gone, hopefully Peggy would openly offer to console her. It was a selfish thought, but if she wasn’t going to have a husband anymore, she at least wanted someone who believed in her before the serum changed her.

Peggy ignored her question entirely and handed her a small metal device, “This is your transponder. Activate it when you’re ready, and the signal will lead us straight to you.”

“Are you sure this thing works?” Stephanie asked Howard. She didn’t want to find Bucky only to end up stranded in enemy territory.

“Been tested more than you, doll.” He countered. Fair enough.

Suddenly, sharp bangs took them by surprise and Howard swerved side to side to avoid the shots. Crap, they’d been spotted. It was too dangerous for them to keep going on their planned path now. Stephanie grabbed her shield and headed straight for the exit.

“Get back here! We’re taking you all the way there!” Peggy ordered her and tried to pull on her arm, but barely missed.

“As soon as I’m clear, you turn this thing around and get the hell out of here!” Stephanie sat down to prepare to jump.

“You can’t give me orders!”

“The hell I can’t! I’m a Captain!” She smiled in excitement and pulled her goggles over her eyes, giving her a salute before leaping out.

Once Stephanie hit the ground, it finally hit her that she lacked a plan. Her outline of a strategy was basically to find the front door, sneak in somehow, find Bucky among the prisoners, and leave the way she came, but when she actually found the place, she saw that Col. Phillips was right when he said it was one of the most fortified stations in Europe. There were searchlights, guard towers, wired fences, and hundreds of guards walking about. Luckily, she arrived as a series of trucks came up to the gates. She chased the last one down just in time to leap into the back. It took a few seconds before she realized she wasn’t alone. Two Hydra guards sat there and just stared at the mysterious woman in a star-spangled outfit who just leapt into their ride.

“Fellas.” She politely nodded. When they charged at her, she kicked and punched them out of the truck. As much as she wanted to savor the victory, she had to stay focused on the big mission, but she did pump her fist in the air now that she was alone. When the truck started to park, she hid behind her shield towards the tarp in the back. When a guard opened it to check its contents, she flung her shield towards him and sent him flying back. She widened her eyes that she could do that for real.

The dark night sky made the guard towers and warehouses the only sources of light to guide her way. She ran past dozens and dozens of large tanks all decorated with the skull and tentacle arms for a symbol. Most of the guards stayed focus on watching people on the ground, so she avoided their gaze by climbing up on the rooftops and jumping from building to building, something she learned growing up in Brooklyn. Once inside the big building, she found that most of the guards she had to knock out on the way were too distracted by her outfit to make the first punch. It sure made her job a lot easier.
She snuck behind anything large and made of metal through several rooms that were mass-producing…something. Peggy said it was a factory, so she might as well find out and report something useful to the Colonel. It may not win his forgiveness, but it would make her a team player. She came across a table of gun magazines that were glowing blue for some reason. Was it some kind of radiation? For the moment, she ignored the possibility that it was immediately dangerous and stuffed it in her pocket. She needed to listen for clues to where they kept their prisoners.

She noticed that the workers didn’t sound German or Italian. They sounded French, English, and sometimes American. They must have been using prisoners for labor, so wherever they were coming and going must be the way to the rest of them. She found the hallway where prisoners would be dragged in and go to work, and eventually she made her way to a room that had rows of cages beneath the platform, with a single row of guards watching them. They were easy enough to take out, but she heard curses of disbelief from beneath her as she knocked each one unconscious. She stole the keys out of one’s pocket, but was interrupted by one of the prisoners.

“Who are you supposed to be?” One of them asked her, believing he was so tired and hungry that he was hallucinating a buxom pin-up model from his magazines back at camp coming to rescue them. The view up her skirt certainly seemed like it was from a magazine.

“Um…” She really hadn’t planned on making any introductions. Should she go ahead and use her real name? It was probably still too dangerous for that, “Captain America.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Steph unlocked every cell, desperately looking for Bucky in each of them, but no luck. When she opened the last one, she pleaded, “Please, is there anyone else? I’m looking for Sgt. James Barnes.”

“There’s an isolation ward in the factory. No one’s every come back from it.” One of the British soldiers in a red beret answered.

_Please, God. Don’t let me be too late._ She gulped down hard as she stormed in that direction, “Alright…the treeline is northwest. It’s eighty yards past the gate. Get out fast and give ’em hell. I’ll meet you guys in the clearing with anybody else I find.”

“Wait,” one of them stopped her, “You know what you’re doing?”

“Yeah, I’ve knocked out Adolf Hitler over 200 times.” She gave them her show smile before rushing off to find her husband.

The alarms went off, sending the hundreds of guards scattering. Once she located the isolation ward, she zoomed straight for it, knocking every guard out of her path with the shield or a kick. When she ran through the empty hallway with quiet rooms, she saw a little well-dressed man with round glasses and a red bowtie carrying his things out of his office. He was probably one of the scientists, and that was his lab that he just abandoned.

It was too quiet in the lab, which made her assume the worst, but as she crept closer, she could hear a low mumbling. She saw a man strapped to the lab table, beaten and weary, but still alive. She already started tearing up before she even got close enough to confirm it was him.

“Bucky!” She grabbed his face and kissed him madly, trying to break him out of his daze. He looked horribly filthy and hurt which made her whimper “My God” under her breath as she yanked the straps off of him. She tenderly picked up his head and his shoulders, letting her tears fall as she desperately prayed that he was truly alright, “Honey, it’s me. It’s Stephanie.”
Bucky’s face looked like his soul had come back to his body as he came to and excitedly embraced her, “Stephanie!”

Time stopped to give them the moment they needed to kiss. It was sloppy, and their noses got smushed together, but it was the best Stephanie had had in a long time. She pulled him off of the table and struggled to speak through her weeping, “I thought you were dead.”

“…I thought you were smaller.” Bucky finally noticed the change once he stood up and found that she wasn’t the petite little blonde he was accustomed to. As he was trying to soak in all the differences, Stephanie focused on the map behind him that had targets marked with flags.

“C’mon!” She pulled him into her arms like she was carrying him over the threshold. It was easier since he had little strength to run.

“What happened to you?” He murmured, since he was too weak to truly get angry.

“I joined the army.” She said in a way that indicated she would explain later once they weren’t in a Nazi laboratory/factory swarming with people trying to kill them.

“Did it hurt?” He touched her face as she ran with him.

“A little.”

“Is it permanent?” He sounded like he would be disappointed if she said yes.

“So far.”

Once they got to the series of stairs, she had to let him down so they could climb them faster. It was a maze of metal that made multiple turns and misleading directions. As they ran hand-in-hand across the suspended path, they heard a distinct German voice from across.

“Captain America! How exciting. I am a great fan of your films.” A tall broad-shouldered man with strongly defined cheekbones and a black leather uniform with the logo from the tanks smiled smugly at her with the smaller scientist from earlier right by his side, gawking at her. She really doubted he was talking about the movies made for schoolchildren. He walked towards her across the iron bridge that hung over the inferno that was the remains of the factory, with his eyes leering up and down her form, especially keen on her legs, “So Dr. Erskine managed it after all. Not exactly an improvement, but still…” He nodded, with his gaze on her torso, “…Impressive.”

She socked him right in the face when she was close enough. She wasn’t going to take kind of eyeballing from anyone, especially not crazy scientists who looked at her like a specimen and locked up her husband and hundreds of others.

“You got no idea.” She growled. She also noticed that the skin under his eye was not out of place. Either something was off about it, or she could punch a man’s skin right off.

“Haven’t I?” He threw a punch right back at her, but the shield caught it. Still, it was hard enough to leave a fist-shaped dent right through it. If he knew about Dr. Erskine and was that strong, he must’ve been Johann Schmidt. She reached for her gun, but he smacked it out of her hand, sending it over the edge and her to floor. When he came closer, she kicked him back to his side of the bridge, which then started to draw back and create a widening gap between them.

“No matter what lies Erskine told you, you see I was his greatest success.” Schmidt boasted and then grabbed at the skin of his neck, which tore and revealed that the “flesh” of his face was merely a mask, and his true face was a skull of the most saturated color of red. Both she and Bucky just stared
in disgust and disbelief.

“You don’t have one of those, do you?” Bucky mumbled.

“You are deluded, Captain.” Schmidt locked eyes with her as he disposed of his mask, “You pretend
to be a simple showgirl, but I see more in you. Together, we could make the perfect race, but you’d
rather waste that potential to be with your pathetic spouse there. You call it love or loyalty. But in
reality, you are just afraid to admit that we have left humanity behind. Unlike you, I embrace it
proudly. No fear.”

“Then how come you’re running?” Steph shouted, but he shut the door behind him without a
response, “Can you believe that guy? Never seen him before and he’s already talking about a perfect
race with me. I tell ya, if he wants to get fucked so badly, he can just suck my-”

More explosions reminded her that they needed to get out and quick. She found a door on a higher
level with a crane going across.

“Let’s go. One at a time.” She let Bucky go first, and he steadily walked across like on a tightrope,
but as it started giving out, he ran across it and grabbed railing of the other side just in time.
Unfortunately, the bridge was out, so she couldn’t cross. They looked at each other in horror for a
moment before Bucky exclaimed, “There’s got to be a rope or something!”

“No, not without you!” He firmly smacked the railing and clutched it stubbornly.

Stephanie had no other choice. She bent the railing away from her, which was as simple as bending
rubber tubing. She stepped as far back as she could to give her a running start, before leaping across
the gap with the fires exploding under her.

Peggy solemnly carried the photos of the destruction in her hand and presented them to Col. Phillips,
“The last surveillance flight is back. No sign of activity.”

“Go get a cup of coffee, Corporal.” The Colonel signed and rested his hands on his hips, looking out
to the remaining men of the 107th, “Can’t touch Stark, he’s rich. And he’s the army’s number one
weapons contractor. You are neither one.”

Peggy stiffened her face and looked him in the eye, “With respect, sir, I don’t regret my actions, and
I don’t think Captain Rogers did, either.”

“What makes you think I give a damn about your opinions?” He was quietly furious, “I took a
chance with you, Agent Carter, and now America’s golden girl and a lot of good men are dead,
because you had a crush.”

“It wasn’t that.” She snapped, “I had faith.”

“Well I hope that’s a big comfort to you when they shut this division down.” He lost his focus on her
when the men outside started making a fuss and running towards something, “What the hell is going
on out there?”

The crowd’s murmurs turned into cheering as the gates opened up to let in Captain Stephanie
Barnes, Sergeant James Barnes, and the rescued 107th back into camp. Steph and Bucky walked side by side, squeezing each other’s hands without any chance of letting go. A lot of the other soldiers clapped for her as she came their way. Colonel Phillips marched right up to her with his usual sour expression. She stood at attention and saluted, “Some of these men need medical attention. I’d like to surrender myself for disciplinary action.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Col. Phillips slowly broke into a pleased smile and turned to Agent Carter, “Faith, huh?”

Peggy smiled and quickly went up to hug Stephanie herself, hiding the relieved tears in her eyes, “You’re late.”

Stephanie squeezed her tightly before pulling the busted transponder out of her tattered coat pocket, “Couldn’t call my ride. Also, sorry about the jacket. I’ll replace it, I promise.”

Peggy just laughed, “Don’t worry about it. It was old anyway.”

“Hey!” Bucky called out to the rest of the troops, “Let’s hear it for my wife, Captain America!”

Bucky pulled Stephanie by the waist and dipped her, which she embraced happily, kissing him with a smile, to the thunderous applause of everyone, including Peggy.
Domestic Affairs

After all the rescued soldiers were accounted for, Stephanie and Bucky went off to her cabin for the private talk they desperately needed.

“Are you mad at me?” She clutched her elbows, tightening herself.

“I… I don’t know where to start.” Bucky rubbed the back of his sweat-stained neck. He fell on the bed, feeling the crash after the adrenaline rush. He lay over the covers with his head on the pillow. He exhaled loudly as he looked her up and down again, slowly accepting that he wasn’t hallucinating or dreaming, “Just… how?”

She sat down next to him and straightened her skirt, “It was an experiment. I tried to enlist in the WAC again, and this nice old man with the SSR, Dr. Erskine, picked me to test out his super soldier serum for Project Rebirth. They were supposed to make a whole army of super soldiers if it worked, and it did, but…”

“Woah, woah…” Bucky weakly waved his hand to slow her down, “…when did all this happen?”

“Well, I signed up for the project… two… three hours after you left?” She blushed with her smile.

Bucky sucked in his breath and let out a long strained moan and rolled over on his face, “I love you, but you will be the death of me.”

“That’s not all.” She slowly scooched closer to him, feeling her stomach sour with her ever-growing confession, “It worked on me, but there was a man… he was a spy for Hydra, the guys who captured you, and he killed Dr. Erskine and tried to steal what was left of the serum. I stopped him, but the vial broke, so now the serum’s gone, and there’s no way to recreate it yet, so I’m the only one. They didn’t know what to do with me, so Senator Brandt had me put on tour as Captain America—”

“You’re Captain America!” His lifted his face from his pillow and laughed like he was going mad, “My wife is Captain America, and she never even wrote me a letter about it! I saw your pictures and I just thought, ‘No, that doesn’t look like my wife. Her eyes and nose may be similar, but her cheeks aren’t nearly that full, and she’s way too short and her… arm muscles are not as big.’ I thought you were at home. I thought the mail was backed up and that you weren’t getting my letters and I wasn’t getting yours.”

“Bucky, I’m sorry.” She teared up, genuinely regretful about not writing to him. She couldn’t send him the addresses and schedules for her tour stops without unraveling the whole secret, so they were piling up at their apartment over the past couple of months. Also, since she wasn’t reading his letters, she couldn’t respond to them properly, so the letter writing was put off, “I thought that if I told you the truth sooner, you’d do something crazy like go AWOL.”

“Oh, Steph…” Bucky immediately cooled down when he saw her starting to cry, “Baby, I’m not… I’m not angry. I just… I never expected any of this. Serums and blue glowing weapons and… guys who can rip off their faces, I don’t know what’s real anymore.”

“It’s all real,” She rubbed the wetness off of her cheek and chuckled, “I guess I just called it normal after a while, but it is crazy.”

Bucky slugged his way over to her and put his dirt-coated hand on her cheek, “So how much of you is different?”
“Dr. Erskine said that it amplifies everything. So basically everything you see, and then some on the inside.” She started to explain, but then remembered something crucial that made her eyes light up like stars and made her grab his wrist and squeeze it tightly, “Bucky!”

“I’m right here.” He murmured.

“I can have kids.” She exclaimed, watching his face, waiting for his gears to finish turning.

“Get out of here.” He jerked up his head and dropped his jaw.

“I’m serious! The serum fixed it! It fixed everything. No more asthma, no more heart problems,” She stood up and hit her chest with her palm as she beamed, “You are looking at the healthiest woman in America.”

Bucky couldn’t even say anything. He just sat up with his dopey look of shock that turned into the most precious smile. That alone was worth everything she went through. A second wind gave him the energy to wrap his arms around her and spin her in the air, even though it wasn’t as easy as it used to be.

“I knew you’d like that part.” She kissed him as he let her down, and she didn’t want to pull away. He held her face as he kissed her back harder.

“You know, I’m pretty sure the Colonel wouldn’t mind giving us the day to ourselves.” She gave a sly smile as she rubbed his chest through his damp shirt.

“Oh yeah, nothing’s changed about you.” He laughed, but pulled away, “As much as I want to, I would literally kill for a shower and a nap right now.”

She smiled sweetly, “Rough day at work, honey?”

“Haha, you don’t even know.” He pulled off his sweat-soaked shirt and threw it in her pile of dirty clothes in the corner. Being covered in filth and sweat herself, she tagged alongside him as they snuck out to the field showers. It was such a big relief for Bucky who hadn’t been near water for days.

“Woah…” He raised his eyebrows and whistled as she took off her uniform and revealed her bare body to him.

“I know, I have these things now.” She giggled as she felt herself up.

Watching her undress reminded him of something that was now quite horrifying.

“Oh my God,” He murmured, “You’re Captain America.”

“Yeah,” She soaked her hair thoroughly, “We’ve covered that.”

“But that means…all this time, the guys here have been using your picture to…Oh, I’m gonna kill them!” He paced back and forth and rubbed his face with his palm.

“Relax, they were jerking it to paper copies of this fantasy of the perfect woman.” She scrubbed the dirt off of her neck, “It wasn’t me. Well, it was, but c’mon, they didn’t know who I was. I’m not some big Hollywood star. I’m just the mascot for the USO. I’m a cartoon character made to boost morale.”

Bucky held his hips as he stared in realization for a few minutes, “…Am I Sergeant Sweetheart?”
“Oh shoot! Yes! I forgot!” She rubbed her forehead, “The guys are gonna want to do a comic about you.”

“Me?! I didn’t sign up for this.” He practically squawked with his hoarse throat.

“Well now that you’re here, they can draw us together, and they can make you a main character, and everything.” She took the initiative to scrub him if he was just going to stand there and get poured on.

“Now this is just crazy.” He shook his head.

“Please, Buck?” She pouted, “It’s for the kids. They really wanna know who Sergeant Sweetheart is.”

“Do I have to wear a tacky costume?” He asked, deadpan.

“Well it has to go good with mine.” She put on that nervous smile that she’d been wearing a lot today.

He sighed deeply, using up the last of his patience, “I’m having a good day today, so for now, I’m gonna say yes, but only once, and you owe me one.”

“Thanks, Bucky.” She hugged him tightly.

Once they washed all the grime from the Hydra base off them, they ran back to her private quarters in nothing but their towels. Peggy accidentally saw them as she headed for the cabin with the intent of asking them if they were going to join the rest of the troops for lunch in the mess hall, but when she noticed the lovely laughing couple trying to keep their towels from dropping, she turned right back around.

Stephanie and Bucky didn’t put on any clothes when they got inside, they just plopped on the bed. Neither of them had gotten any sleep all night, with Steph breaking into enemy territory and Bucky trying to keep himself from dying on a lab table. As they lay next to each other, they took a good look, and Steph noticed that Bucky wasn’t the same either. His eyes were sunken in and worn, and not just from lack of sleep. He’d seen horrors that she didn’t even want to imagine, and they left their marks in his glassy stare. His knuckles were scabbed over, and he has serious bruises on his chest and arms. All this time they’d been talking about what happened to her, and she never even asked about what happened to him. She wanted to ask now, but as his eyes drooped to sleep, she realized this wasn’t the time. She just grabbed his calloused and scabbed hands and kissed them before curling up on his chest like she always did, whispering one thing before she closed her eyes,

“You’re beautiful.”
“The fifth one was here in Poland, near the Baltics, and the sixth one was about...here, thirty or forty miles west of the maginal line.” Stephanie marked the map of Europe in pencil as she struggled to recollect the locations on the map she saw, “I just got a quick look.”

“Well, nobody’s perfect.” Peggy shrugged as the map was taken away, but smiled at Steph. She knew why she was so distracted at that moment.

“Hey, aren’t you supposed to be picking up a medal right now?” Howard called out as he was strolling by, surprised to see Stephanie in an olive green dress uniform instead of her regular outfit. She was even wearing the lipstick that Peggy lent her.

“I’ve decided I’m officially off the press circuit.” She nodded to Peggy, “Besides, I sent Bucky to accept it on my behalf.”

Stephanie joined Colonel Phillips and Peggy at the table with all of Hydra’s known coordinates, and explained, “These are the weapon factories we know about. Sergeant Barnes said that Hydra shipped all these parts to another facility that isn’t on this map.”


“What about us?” Peggy asked.

“We are gonna set a fire under Johann Schmidt’s ass.” Col. Phillips always cut to the point. Stephanie admired that. She smiled widely, approving enormously of that plan. Schmidt’s larger goals were bad enough, but he made this fight personal, so she wanted to be the one to take him prisoner. She was so taken by the idea, she didn’t notice Pvt. Lorraine subtly smiling her way.

“What do you say, Barnes?” Col. Phillips took her by surprise with his offer, “It’s your map. You think you can wipe Hydra off of it?”

Stephanie was so shocked that she almost dropped her jaw. Even Peggy’s face went still with pleasant surprise before she smiled and nodded to her.

“Yes sir!” She exclaimed a little too loudly before going back to acting professional, “I’ll need a team.”

“We’re already putting together the best men.”

“With all due respect sir, so am I.” Stephanie remembered what his idea of the best men were from before she got the serum. She wasn’t going to risk having a team she couldn’t trust to be civilized with her. Certainly, no one who disrespected her when she was the showgirl was going to get in her good graces so quickly now that she was a soldier. She thought of the men she liberated from the Hydra base when rescued Bucky. They didn’t question her or make quips when she gave them a plan; they just did what needed to be done to get everyone out safely. That was the kind of team she needed. Also, they already had some personal experience fighting Hydra that was also vital to what she was looking for.

When Bucky returned with her medal, she told him about how the Colonel wanted her to lead the team to attack Hydra, and how she wanted him and the top guys from the 107th that had been captured with him. He told her about Jim Morita, Dum Dum Dugan, Gabe Jones, Jacques Dernier,
and Monty Falsworth: all the guys who stuck with him while they were prisoners. As he described them to her, she believed she could remember which ones she met during the rescue.

That evening, at the local tavern, she personally asked them to join her team.

“So let’s get this straight…” Dugan took a big chug of his beer.

“We barely got out of there alive and you want us to go back?” Gabe Jones asked like she was crazy.

Stephanie scratched her neck and nodded, “Pretty much?”

“Sounds rather fun, actually.” Farnsworth slyly smiled, actually considering the offer.

Jim Morita held down a burp before declaring, “I’m in.”

Dernier started going off in French and laughing, carrying on a little conversation with Gabe that Stephanie could only smile awkwardly at as she gave a mental note to learn some French.

“We’re in.” Gabe gestured for the both of them.

“Hell, I’ll always fight, but you gotta do one thing for me.” He smiled before gulping down the rest of beer.

“What’s that?”

“Open a tab.” He answered, which made her smile and break everyone into laughter. She ordered another round for the group before rejoining her husband at the bar.

“See? I told you, they’re all idiots.” Bucky smirked as he sipped his scotch, holding a copy of the latest issue of the Captain America comic book.

“Is that new? Let me see it.” She took it from his hands, and hid her laughter in her palm. In big thick blue letters across the yellow page read “SGT Sweetheart Revealed!” with Captain America in her trademark outfit being carried bridal-style by a blacked-out figure with a question mark over the face.

“That shadow doesn’t even look like me.” He shook his head as he took another sip.

“It’s just the generic look for these comics, don’t worry.” She flipped the pages looking for him.

“I’m on page 16.” He said dryly, waiting for her to burst into hysterical laughter at any moment.

When she found the page, she kept all her giggles in her tightly bit lips and banged her fist on the bar. Not only was his character as clean-shaved as a youth, but his outfit was nothing like what she expected.

“Fucking. Red. Tights.” He groaned and inhaled deeply to contain himself, “Red tights, blue… pajamas, and a fucking black mask, like I’m Zorro or something.”

“You look adorable.” She cooed and rubbed his cheek through her laughter, which made him smile back.

“If you make me wear that in real life, I’m quitting the team.” He firmly planted his hand on the bar. She nudged his shoulder and patted his back for being such a good sport.

“So does that mean you’re ready to follow Captain America into the jaws of death?” She threw her
hair over her shoulder in an exaggerated pose like she would for her shows.

“Hell no. My little wife from Brooklyn who was too dumb not to run away from a fight…I’m following her.” For the first time since they’d been reunited, he looked at her like he used to. Even in the days after the rescue, they still hadn’t actually gotten to that point of reconnecting. While they slept next to each other and did other little intimate things, Bucky still hadn’t gotten completely comfortable in their new situation yet, but she was willing to give him time. Now, it looked like they were making some progress. Maybe it was the drinks, or maybe he just realized that no matter what she looked like, she was still the reckless fool he fell in love with, but for once it felt like nothing had changed. She looked into his soft eyes and smiling lips and leaned forward to kiss him. He met her halfway and pulled her into his lap and embraced her during the kiss.

“You’re keeping the outfit, right?” He asked softly when they broke away to breathe.

“You know what?” She giggled, and looked back at her poster for a moment, “It’s kind of grown on me.”

The drunken singing around them died down, and at first they ignored it since they were focused on each other, but their personal moment ended when they realized it was Agent Carter strolling to their part of the bar, which made Stephanie awkwardly slide off Bucky’s lap as they both stood at attention. She blushed and widened her eyes at seeing Peggy’s lovely red dress.

“Captain.” Peggy addressed Stephanie, amused yet for some reason slightly put off at catching her friend snogging with her husband.

“Agent Carter.” Stephanie nodded politely, which somehow disappointed Peggy. What happened to the gal who would exclaim her name loudly and wrap her arms around her tightly in a hug? It wasn’t like they were on base. Maybe her suit just felt a little too starched, or she was just embarrassed.

“Ma’am.” Bucky also politely gestured.

“Howard has some equipment for you to try. Tomorrow morning.” Peggy informed her.

“Sounds good.” Stephanie murmured, still blushing until something struck her, “Oh! I can’t believe I forgot! You two haven’t really met! Peggy, this is Bucky, and Bucky, this is Peggy. She helped me rescue everyone here.” Stephanie finally relaxed and even touched Peggy’s arm, “I couldn’t have gotten this far without her. And Bucky here has just agreed to join our little squad. Trust me, he is the best of the best.”

There she was. Peggy smiled and looked over to the drunken group who had resumed singing, “I see your top squad is prepping for duty.”

“You don’t like music?” Bucky asked, relaxing a bit.

“I do, actually. I might even, when this is all over, go dancing.” Peggy’s smile looked a little too flirty in Bucky’s opinion, but Stephanie missed it by long shot.

“That sounds great, we can all go dancing together!” Stephanie held both of their arms, “The three of us.”

Peggy looked up and down the unkempt man reeked of scotch and realized she wasn’t sure what she expected of the man who stole her friend’s heart, but it probably wasn’t this. He was good-looking to a point, but she didn’t like the way he was glaring at her right now. On the other hand, Bucky didn’t know what to think of this tall woman who Stephanie was apparently close with, even though she had never brought her up before. He recognized that blush in her face when she had a crush.
“800, Captain.” Peggy said before going on her way.

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll be there!” Stephanie cheerily waved after her.

Bucky waited a few moments before daring to ask, “So how do you know her again?”

“Peggy’s a friend from the SSR.” Stephanie explained, “She was my supervisor when I signed up for the super soldier project. She and Dr. Erskine were the only ones who thought I had a chance.”

Bucky cleared his throat uncomfortably.

“Oh, of course you would have to, if you knew about it.” Stephanie rubbed his leg.

“So you two are…close?” Bucky blew some air out like he would when he wanted to defend her from someone.

“James Buchanan Barnes…is that jealousy I hear?” Stephanie opened her mouth to fake a gasp.

“Well she didn’t come here in that dress for me.” Bucky guzzled down the rest of his drink.

“Well she thought I was going to be a widow, so…” Stephanie jokingly chuckled until he laughed with her.

“This is why I can’t take you anywhere. You’re such a ladykiller, I have to take you home before you take the virtue of everyone here.” He playfully threw her over his shoulder, an amazing feat since she was now about twice the weight he was used to. He had also gotten significantly stronger since he joined the Army. She chuckled and jokingly shrieked as he carried her out of the tavern and all the way to their cabin, where he threw her on the bed before climbing in himself.

As he crawled on top of her, she felt hopeful that this would be the night he finally gave in. She kissed him fervently and pulled his collar towards her, begging for him to go further, but once again, after a few minutes of heaving petting and some undressing, he pulled his hesitant hands away from her legs and just lay on his back. She sighed and pulled the covers over herself, feeling slightly hurt.

“What’s wrong, Bucky? Why don’t you like touching me?” She hugged the blankets to her chest.

“I do like it, but…” Bucky rubbed his mouth, trying to keep himself from saying the wrong thing, “Steph, please…I love you.”

“I love you, too, but how long is it going to be like this? I miss you.” She reached out to pet his hair, “Please, just tell me what’s going on in there.”

“I…I know it’s you, but it doesn’t…feel like you.” Bucky curled up on his side, biting his knuckle, “It’s just all so different, and I wasn’t prepared for this at all. I’m afraid that if I…and it’s all different…then you, or that part of you at least…is completely gone.”

Stephanie had to admit, she felt some pang of rejection, but she could see where Bucky was coming from. She wasn’t so sure she was even the same person when she first got the serum. She often felt like a host inhabiting a stranger’s body. It only made sense that Bucky was also afraid she’d be a total stranger.

“I’m sorry, Steph…” Bucky choked out, and she could tell he was getting teary-eyed.

She scooted herself closer to him and cupped his hands in hers and kissed his cheek, “I can’t promise you that it won’t be different. It probably will be, but if you don’t want to find out if this new me is
any good, that’s okay, too. Just being with here with you is good enough for me.”

He wiped his own tears away, cheering himself with the irony that after years of being the big spoon, she was now making him a little spoon.

“I’m also a little scared you’re gonna break me. It’s a nightmare, I’m turning into you.” Bucky forced himself to smile.

“Hey, only you were scared that you were gonna break me.” She laughed, “but I promise I’ll go easy on you.”

“But will it still be good for you if you go easy on me?” Bucky asked.

“Buck, I’m not even sure what this body likes yet. I’ve had a hard time figuring out what got rewired, and it pisses me off.”

“Really now?”

“Yeah, there’s like so much new territory and I haven’t had the time to explore it all.”

“Is that supposed to make me feel better?”

“I’m just saying, your guess is as good as mine.”

“Well, now you’ve got me all curious.”

“Good.”
Bucky used to watch Steph get dressed when they got ready for work, but this morning, he turned away as she stepped into her skirt and zipped it up, like he would politely do so for a stranger. Her spirits fell low. *Damn, I really thought we made some progress, but I guess he still doesn’t see me.* She also noticed his uniform has been left on the floor all night.

“Oh Buck, you’ll get an earful if you show up with a wrinkled suit.” She swiped it off of the floor and set it on the ironing board.

“I’ll take care of it.” He reached for the iron but she pulled it away.

“You take a shower. You still reek of scotch.” She looked him up and down. He slept the whole night, but he still looked exhausted, with purple bags and red around his eyes. His hair was slick with natural oils. His voice croaked like his throat was scratchy, “You don’t look so hot, are you sick?”

“Nah,” He crinkled his nose as he shook his head, “It’s just the air here. It does something to me.”

“Get some rest, if you need it, and take care of your uniform.” She said as she delicately ran the iron over the collar.

“Well, that was an order, Captain?” He weakly smiled as he grabbed a towel.

“C’mon, none of that stuff here. Save it for the field.” She pressed harder against the thick fabric. It would be cute for him to call her that if he didn’t sound so distant when he said it.

As Bucky passed by the mirror, he had to double take to make sure it was really him he saw. He peeked over his shoulder to make sure Steph wasn’t watching. He looked at the crevices of his cheeks and eyes which looked more sunken the longer he stared. However, when he blinked, that all went away and he was himself again. Sure, Stephanie didn’t look like her old self, but at least she still acted like it. She still smiled and walked and talked the same way, even if she was bigger than before. However, Bucky couldn’t help but feel like he was the one who came back changed. He looked at her, ironing the clothes like he would be doing if they were back in Brooklyn. Should he tell her that he didn’t feel right? She was already starting to suspect.

“Hey Steph?” He called out.

“Yeah?” She spun around with his neatly pressed suit in hand, smiling like she was hopefully waiting for him to say something nice.

Well, now he couldn’t say anything at all. How could he explain it to her? He couldn’t even truly explain it to himself. Besides, she had other things to worry about now, so his problems would just have to wait a little bit.

“Don’t you have to meet with Stark this morning?” He ended up saying.

“Oh, yeah, of course.” She chuckled to herself. For a second she had actually thought he was going to ask that she stay for a moment, like for maybe a quick roll in the sheets before work. He used to ask for that sometimes, and it could’ve done them both some good, but today was not the day for that.

A small speck of doubt grew to a gnawing sensation on her shoulders by the time she made it Stark’s working office. Here she was thinking she would be late, and Howard wasn’t even there.
“Excuse me; I’m looking for Mr. Stark.” She politely told Pvt. Lorraine, who was distracted with the morning paper.

“He’s in with Colonel Phillips.” She said without a care, but when she turned to see who it was, her attitude instantly got friendlier, “Of course, you’re welcome to wait.

Something about her smile made Steph’s heart flutter for a moment. It was only a polite smile, but it looked more devious than that. She just calmly sat against the desk with her hands in her lap, looking around to avoid eye contact.

“I, uh, read about what you did.” Pvt. Lorraine kept that sinister smile as she spun around in her chair and flashed the newspaper with Steph’s big rescue mission plastered all over the front page.

“Oh that, yeah…well that’s…” Stephanie fumbled her fingers and her words, unable to concentrate with this woman staring at her like that, “…just doing what needed to be done.”

“Sounded like more than that,” Pvt. Lorraine nearly purred, “You saved nearly 400 men.”

Stephanie just smiled awkwardly, and felt a nervous heat as she thought she saw the private looking her up and down, with…interest?

“Really, it’s not a big deal.” Steph waved her hand. If Bucky hadn’t been among the captured, she probably wouldn’t have gotten involved in the first place.

“Tell that to their wives.” Pvt. Lorraine slowly pulled out of her chair and walked seductively towards her. Now Steph knew she wasn’t imagining things. She still wasn’t used to this kind of attention from men, so getting it from a woman was even more unexpected and nerve-wrecking.

Stephanie tucked her arms and clenched her body together uncomfortably, “Uh…I don’t think they were all married.”

“You’re a hero,” Pvt. Lorraine whispered softly in her face, close enough for a whiff of her nice perfume to tingle Stephanie’s senses and paralyze her.

“Well, th-that depends on the definition-“

“Your fellow women of America, they owe you their thanks.” Pvt. Lorraine clutched onto Steph’s tie and pulled her to behind the shelf of files, “And since they’re not here…”

Even when she had approached her, Stephanie still hadn’t expected that kiss. It was most certainly not the friendly kiss on the cheek she could handle, or the quick endearing kiss on the lips. It was the passionate kiss of wanting, and the red alerts in Steph’s head screamed for her to pull away and get out of there. She was married, for goodness sake, and everyone knew that! What was she going to tell Bucky? She was going to tell him for certain, but how was he going to take it? Would he get jealous? Would he confront Pvt. Lorraine personally? Sure, he was joking about her and Peggy, but this was absolutely crossing the line.

Before she could gather her thoughts and push Pvt. Lorraine off, she heard Peggy’s stern call, “Captain!”

At first, she was grateful for Peggy interrupting, but judging from her hands on her hips and her reprimanding glare, she was horrified that Peggy might have gotten the wrong idea.

“We’re ready for you if you’re not otherwise occupied.” Peggy said with disdain that pierced Steph’s heart.
After rubbing the kiss off of her lips, Steph went after her friend, hoping to explain everything, “Agent Carter, wait!”

“It’s not my business which partner you choose to dance with.” Peggy said coldly as she refused to face her. She kept marching forward as she processed what she saw. Here she thought Stephanie was one of the most faithful women she knew, and if she didn’t act on her impulses with her, then those impulses must not have existed if that floozy Lorraine was more tempting. Her anger and confusion seethed and flushed her cheeks.

“Peggy, that is not what you thought it was.” Stephanie spoke quietly as she paced behind her, trying to keep up. So she was right, Peggy now thought she was a cheater. She had to clear it up now before things got out of hand.

“I don’t think anything, Captain. Not one thing.” Peggy shot her down. She had nothing to say to her right now. She knew married women who made girlfriends when they joined the Army and then dropped them like a hat when their husband came back. Of course it was only right that they stick to the person they married, but Peggy saw nothing fun nor flirty about treating an affair with a woman less seriously than one with a man. “You always wanted to join the women in the WAC, and now here you are, just like all of them.”

Steph knew when she was being ignored and insulted, and she never liked it one bit. It didn’t matter who it was. She trusted Peggy, yet here she was being dismissed like she never mattered. She lost it and snapped, “Well what about you and Stark? How do I know you two haven’t been…fondueing?”

Peggy finally stopped and turned around, with a look that read “seriously?” in her eyes and lips. Peggy wasn’t the one who was married, so she knew this was not really about her. She knew that Stephanie knew that the fiasco with Pvt. Lorraine back there was wrong, and until she said it, Peggy had no patience for this.

“Maybe this is why the other housewives didn’t talk to you.” Peggy stung her with parting words, as her frustration created an erroneous fantasy of Stephanie kissing other women behind the husbands’ backs. She was soon gone, and tears welled up in Stephanie’s eyes as she lost her chance to explain. Perfect, my husband doesn’t want me, and my best friend thinks I’m a whore.

“Alright, Cap, I got a lot of things I want to-“ Howard walked up right next to Steph and cocked his head when he saw her watery eyes, “Hey doll face, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing, Mr. Stark” Stephanie jolted when she saw he was there and pulled out her famous show smile, “It’s just something in the air.”

“No need to be formal. Also, if something’s going on, you can tell me.” He waved his arm around, “There are no judgements here.”

“Can I ask you something personal?” Stephanie rubbed the tears out of her eyes and calmed her voice.

“Sure, we’re friends, aren’t we?” Howard shrugged and smiled warmly.

“Um…” Stephanie knew this wasn’t really her business, but if Peggy was going to close herself off, she wanted to know if what she was thinking was true, “Do you and Peggy…fondue?”

Howard raised his eyebrows and then laughed, putting one arm around her shoulders as he directed them towards his table of supplies, “Fondue is just cheese and bread, my friend.”

“Really?” Now she was even more embarrassed than before, “I didn’t think-“
“Nor should you, pal.” Howard assured her, although now he got the idea that she and Peggy were 
fighting, “The moment you think you know what’s going on in that woman’s head is the moment 
your goose is well and truly cooked. Me? I concentrate on work, which at the moment is making 
sure you and your men do not get killed.” Howard’s hand slid off her shoulders and onto the fighting 
gear at the table, “Carbon polymer, should withstand your average German bayonet. Although, 
Hydra’s not gonna attack you with a pocket knife.”

Howard tapped on the bent metal shield, “I hear you’re kind of attached?”

“It’s handier than you might think.” She said, trying to focus on the work she had to do here.

“I took the liberty of coming up with some options.” He gestured to a whole row of new shields, 
some tackier than others, “This one’s fun. She’s been fitted with electric relays.”

However, Steph noticed one on the bottom row that was simple but very neat and especially shiny. It 
was like it called to her, so she picked it up for closer inspection, “What about this one?”

“No no no, that’s just a prototype.”

“What’s it made out of?” She asked as she the felt the rounded off edges that were smooth to touch.

“Vibranium, stronger than steel and a third of the weight. It’s completely vibration absorbent.” 
Howard explained as he noticed her falling in love with it.

“How come it’s not standard issue?” She asked as she slipped her arm in the straps to get a closer 
feel.

“That’s the rarest metal on earth. What you’re holding there, that’s all we got.” Howard tucked his 
hands in his pockets.

“Are you quite finished, Mr. Stark? I’m sure the Captain has some unfinished business.” Peggy 
strolled in with her sass and judgmental glare.

Well now Steph was all riled up again. If Peggy wasn’t going to wait to hear her side of the story, 
fine, but Steph wasn’t going to let her have the last word now. Stephanie would just have no one to 
talk to after all if Bucky and Peggy wouldn’t even look at her.

“Catch!” She warned her as she tossed the shield Peggy’s way. Peggy’s eyes widened in surprise but 
catched the shield just in time for Stephanie to grab one of the guns off the table and shoot at it three 
times, with the loud bangs in the air making everyone duck for cover. Howard peeked from behind 
his arm to see tears streaming down Steph’s stone cold face.

“Bloody hell, what is the m-“ Peggy’s furious words were cut short when she saw Steph crying.

Stephanie gave one audible sniffle as she inhaled the congestion in her nose and pulled out a small 
piece of paper from her pocket. She aggressively pressed the paper to Howard’s chest.

“I had some ideas about the uniform.” She murmured before she stormed away from the scene to cry 
in peace.
Peggy looked all over the base for Steph, but she was nowhere to be found. Howard took it upon himself to warn Bucky of what he was going to come home to while he was in his laboratory trying out guns.

“Try this one on for size.” Howard handed the big gun to him.

Bucky adjusted the strap properly and practiced his aim with it, “Feels fine, can I test it out?”

“Eeh…I took the bullets out of the testers after the incident this morning.” Howard scratched the back of his neck.

“What happened?” Bucky asked, smiling as he expected a funny story.

“Well…” Howard gripped the edge of the table and blew out a long stream of air, trying to figure out to break the news, “Captain Barnes unloaded a round at Agent Carter. She gave her a shield, of course, but she looked like she really had it out for her.”

“Did something happen?” Bucky’s face fell into a concerned frown, and he got this sinking feeling that he was responsible.

“That’s what I want to know.” Howard shrugged, “Now I know better than to get in between two women in a fight, but I just wanted to keep you in the know.”

“Did Agent Carter say something?” Bucky turned, with the gun still in his grip.

“Woah buddy, let’s not jump to conclusions.” Howard held his hands up defensively, “Like I said, I know nothing about what happened. If you really want to know, talk to the Captain yourself. Communication is key in any relationship; any of my exes can tell you that.”

When everyone went to lunch, Bucky realized Howard was right, and something was wrong, because Stephanie wasn’t in the mess hall. She only skipped lunch when she was upset, and she always regretted her decision later. Even if she was arguing with Agent Carter, he knew that he had definitely said some things that could have upset her. She said she was okay with him not being ready to have sex with her, but as he went over what he said in his head, he realized that what he said had made it seem like she was the problem, but he was too scared to tell her what was wrong with him.

Technically they weren’t allowed to take food back to their rooms, but that didn’t stop Bucky from wrapping his second helping of the sloppy joes in paper and stuffing it in his jacket pocket. When he got back to their cabin, he found Agent Carter hesitating to knock on their door. She carried an unusual air of shame, with a pigeon-toed stance and shoulders clenched together. Whatever happened, she certainly regretted it, but Bucky still felt a simmering heat of anger burning in his stomach along with his own guilt.

“Move aside, I have the key.” Bucky accidentally made her jump and gasp in shock before she turned around and saw it was him.

“Oh yes, terribly sorry.” Peggy stood aside.

As he turned the key, he asked, “You want me to tell her you’re here?”
“No, I’ll just wait until she comes out on her own.” Peggy stuttered a bit and looked down at her feet.

Bucky had his hand on the door knob and was about to turn it, but he decided to see what he could get out of Agent Carter before he went in there, “Are you two fighting?”

Peggy took a deep breath, “I said some things that I shouldn’t have. I came to apologize.”

When Bucky opened the door, they didn’t know whether to be relieved or more concerned about the lack of crying noises. Peggy got one quick peek before Bucky closed the door behind him. Everything in the kitchen and dining area was still neat and in its place, but the bedroom door was closed. He gently knocked, but there was no response. He opened up to find Stephanie curled up in bed, softly heaving.

“Hey beautiful,” he sat down next to her and pulled the sandwich out and set it on the side table, “I saw you missed lunch.”

She curled tighter, pulling the covers more over herself. She wanted to talk, but it was more tempting to stay angry. Bucky heard her quietly groaning, and he pet her hair gently, wiping away the strands on her face.

“I know I said some things last night…” He gulped in his throat, “…that made it sound like I don’t want you as you are. I didn’t…I wasn’t being completely honest, with you or myself. Steph…I don’t know how to explain this to you…”

Stephanie rolled over to face him, suddenly worried, “Are you okay?”

“I don’t know.” He shook his head, “That scientist did some serious shit to me. There were all these injections and shocks. A lot of the time, they put me to sleep, but not always. I can’t even remember parts of it. When I saw you, I thought that I’d died and gone to heaven. I actually felt like I was leaving my own body.”

Stephanie reached out and grabbed his arm, “You’re here, and you’re alive, and you’re safe. Zola can’t hurt you anymore.”

Bucky bit down hard on his lips, “That’s what I’ve been telling myself since I got back, but…I don’t feel like…all of me came back. Sometimes I look in the mirror and I can’t be sure the guy looking back is actually me. He looks back at me like he…controls me. I got to sleep, and I dream about seeing that guy do terrible things to you and to the team and to…” He teared up and his throat painfully closed itself.

Stephanie sat up and wiped the tears off his cheeks, holding his face gently, “Bucky, you could’ve told me about this sooner.”

“Well I was gonna wait until the SSR gave you a moment’s rest, but they’ve got you pretty busy.” Bucky smiled for her.

“I will always make time for you.” She pulled his neck down to kiss her, “I mean, I’ve been here for hours and no one’s come to drag me back to work.” She laughed and wiped her own tears away.

“Yeah, about that…” Bucky looked out towards their door, “…Agent Carter was at the door earlier. She looked like she was scared you were gonna eat her alive or something.”

“Oh, Peggy…” Stephanie went right back into her sour mood and threw her face into her palms.
“So, what’s going on with that?” Bucky asked, feeling like he earned the truth now.

“Private Lorraine kissed me this morning, before my meeting.” She sniffled, “Just completely out of nowhere, and Peggy saw and thought that I was cheating on you. I was going to explain, but she just completely shut me out and I was also kind of afraid she was going to tell you before I could, and then you would get the wrong idea, and then this whole thing would just blow up in my face even more.”

“Is that why you shot her?” Bucky cocked his head.

“I shot at her.” She clarified, but then her face fell in surprise, “Wait, how did you know that? Did she tell you?”

“No, Stark did. He said he didn’t want to get involved, but I think he just didn’t want to get shot at next.” Bucky chuckled at the thought.

“Ugh, I made a fool of myself in there.” She fell back on the pillows, “I know they’re never gonna let me live it down.”

“Well if they know what’s good for them, they won’t say a word.” Bucky shook her shoulder, “and you gotta eat this before it gets cold.” He handed her sandwich.

Stephanie got out of bed so that she could eat it properly at the table and not get crumbs in their sheets, revealing that she’d taken her skirt off before she’d gotten into bed. She sat at the table in her button-up shirt and waist-high panties, taking big hungry bites out of her sloppy joe. He stood in the doorway, leaning against the frame, wondering why he hadn’t told her the truth as soon as he got back. It didn’t frighten her in the slightest. Of course it didn’t. He’d forgotten that Stephanie wasn’t afraid of anything. He always had to be scared for the both of them.

As he watched her wipe her lips and lick the juices off her finger, he finally felt a sense of freedom. He walked over and stood directly behind her chair, firmly grasping her shoulders, “You know, if we’re already out past lunch hour, there’s no extra harm in taking a little more time to ourselves, right?”

Stephanie’s eyes widened with her mouth full of a bite, hoping that she wasn’t imagining the implications. She slowly spun her head over her shoulder to see him giving him the sly smile and winking at her. With one last gulp of her food, she leaped into his arms, wrapping tightly around his neck as he carried her into their bedroom like he used to.

When he threw her on the bed, she unbuttoned her shirt and threw it on the floor where her skirt already was. However, when he tried to unbutton his jacket, she stopped him.

“Drop the pants. Leave the rest on.” She bit her tongue in a devious smile as she unbuckled and unzipped him.

“You little devil…” He grabbed her wrists and kissed and sucked on her neck.

“What can I say…nn…” She felt a good chill, “…I love a man in uniform.”

She fully undressed and lay there displaying her full self, and he looked at her like it was the first time he’d ever seen her beauty.

“I don’t even know where to start.” He whispered as he ran his hand over the length of her leg, which seemed to go on for miles.
“Just do what feels right.” She grabbed him by the tie and kissed him madly.

He rubbed and squeezed along every part of her body, discovering her new sensitive spots. Her breasts may not as been as delicate as they once were, but the soft squishy sides of her hips were now. Every time he kissed something she liked, she pressed his head closer. He crawled over her until he was mounting her, which was very new now that her face wasn’t hidden under him like when she was small. Now, his head could rest on her big chest, and the whole length of her torso and abdomen felt like a cushion under him. When he entered her, she gasped like she was being given something she’d longed for.

“You alright?” He asked, out of habit.

She chuckled and assured him, “Yeah, I’m alright.”

He held onto her shoulders and pulled himself up as he thrusted. She wrapped her limbs around him tightly, possessively squeezing him as he grunted over her. His grunting turned into whimpering as he got lost in how sweet she felt. He thrust harder, making her moan and rake her nails along the back of his neck. She needed this for long that she soon came from the overwhelming feeling of him inside combined with his desperate and warm kisses. Her legs tensed and she shuttered and her arms felt light and dropped off to her sides. Bucky saw her cheeks go red with pleasure and kissed them gently as he reached one arm under her to pull her closer to him. He moaned with her a few more times before he finished on her stomach, and kissed her once more before rolling off.

He looked over to see Stephanie still huffing in pleasure as she tightened her legs together and shivered as she continued to ride out her climax.

“Are you still going?” He asked in surprise.

“Nnn…!” She couldn’t respond, but that noise said it all.

“I guess that serum did amplify everything.” He smiled and played with her hair.

Outside their cabin, Peggy still waited next to their front door, but at some point had been joined by Howard, who had also brought a leftover sloppy joe when he noticed Stephanie hadn’t eaten.

“You didn’t do something to upset her, too, did you?” Peggy asked when Howard leaned against the wall next to her.

“No, I just hate to see her go without lunch, that’s not right.” Howard replied as he tried to peek through the blinded windows.

“Her husband’s in there with her; give them some privacy.” Peggy snapped.

“Is that what you’re doing? As you hang around here in the front like a paparazzo?” Howard stuck his hands in his pockets.

“Captain Barnes and I have unfinished business, which should be taken care of sooner rather than later.” She explained.

“Well if it comes to be later, you want a small bite of this?” Howard held up his sandwich.

“No thank you.” She reached into her jacket and pulled out another stolen sloppy joe for Stephanie,
“I already have one.”
The Seasons before Fall

“It was completely unprofessional and I can’t tell you how sorry I am.” Peggy shuffled behind Stephanie as she munched on her second forgiveness lunch with a spring in her step on the way back to headquarters. She might as well eat all of them since her accelerated metabolism gave her the stomach for it.

“It’s alright, Peggy, besides what I did was unprofessional.” Stephanie wiped the sauce off her lips.

“Well I can’t say I wouldn’t have done the same.” Peggy paced forward until she was next to her.

“Okay, don’t tell Bucky I told you this, but…” Steph leaned closer and whispered, “We were having some…intimacy problems, and they were really getting to me, so then that thing with Pvt. Lorraine happened and I just…blew up.”

“Oh dear.” Peggy’s head jerked back, surprised and yet sort of touched that Steph trusted her with such private details. She felt like one of the gossipy teachers at the Academy in London, except the “dirt” was coming from the woman herself, “Well I would’ve never guessed from how you two couldn’t keep your hands off each other last night.”

“Well, Bucky’s always romantic, that’s just his natural instinct, but what happened to him in that lab…we don’t know how it changed him. “ Steph finally stopped herself before she got too deep, “but the good news is, we worked some things out and now he’s way more open to me.” She beamed with genuine hope and love, which was as a far better sight than her fake show smile.

“I’m glad to hear that.” Peggy caught the contagious smile.

“So all that stuff this morning? Water under the bridge.” Steph crinkled her nose and shook her head, “Besides, we’re a team now. We need to deal with these things head on, or it’s just going build up and bite us all in the butts later.”

“It’s certainly best to start on a good foot.” Peggy nodded.

“So if you have anything to get off your chest, now is the best time.” Steph looked at Peggy, who pursed her lips tightly.

“Nothings comes to mind, but when it does, I’ll let you know.” Peggy opened the door for them.

“Well, if it isn’t the good Captain finally deciding to show up for work,” Colonel Phillips was waiting for them at the table, “Don’t let one victory go to head, Barnes. There’s still plenty for you do to around here. Same for you, Carter.”

“I’m sorry, Colonel. I was just-“

“Don’t give me excuses, Barnes. Just get back to work.” The Colonel grimaced and returned to his charts to plan the team’s missions.

Work entailed a lot of code-cracking, road-tracing, and treasure hunting. Every base they located seemed to include new maps with new locations that they’d have to destroy. Hydra wasn’t kidding when they said cutting off one head will make two more grow in its place. They were constantly on the move, blowing up factories and liberating the soldiers and civilians forced to work themselves to the bone for Hydra’s cause. Soon, Howard had the outfit she asked for all ready to go and gave her shield a matching paint job.
“It feels a little stiff.” She commented as she tried to rotate her arms.

“You just gotta break it in a little. This material is 99% tear-proof, but still breathes, so it’s good for all seasons.”

“And you kept the star and stripes.” She nodded in approval as she checked herself out in the mirror.

“Just like you wanted. You’re gonna look like a million bucks out there, doll.” Howard smiled, running his hands over the brown leather utility strap still on the table. Moments after he said that, Bucky came in adjusting the collar on his new blue jacket, and whistled,

“Damn, who is this tall drink of water?”

“They call me the Star-Spangled Gal, but that’s Captain to you, Sergeant Sweetheart.” Stephanie stuck her shield behind her and posed with her hands on her hips. Bucky hissed at that name but laughed and wrapped his arms around her.

Howard smiled and rubbed the edge of his moustache, “Well, aren’t you two just the American Dream, should I give you some privacy?”

“No, we’ll behave.” Stephanie took Bucky’s hand off her hip but kept it in her grip.

The easy days were when Captain America and the Howling Commandoes could just storm into a building with machine guns and take out all the henchmen inside and blow the place to smithereens. They were made even better when they captured someone higher on Hydra’s ladder. They often proudly boasted that would never talk, but once Stephanie knocked their cyanide capsules out of their mouths, their confidence dissipated along with their once chance at a quick death. She loved when she got to kick them to their knees in front of all the people they’d hurt. It showed them that they were not all-powerful, and there was no immunity for their cruel actions. Often times, it inspired men and women to fight back against their attackers, now that they knew they had a chance to win. Many of their missions went like this, but they were not always so lucky.

The worst days were the ones where there were no Hydra henchmen to fight, or any ties to the Red Skull at all. Sometimes, in the search for another weapons factory or training ground, they found camps. Work camps. Extermination camps. All filled with “undesirables” from European cities. Jewish people, Romani people, disabled people, homosexuals, and anyone else who was deemed “unfit” for “normal” society. The worst part was knowing that even if she freed them and killed everyone keeping them there, they couldn’t just return home. The cities weren’t safe for them, and their houses and businesses had probably already been redistributed to German families. The most she could do was direct them to refugee camps that weren’t at maximum capacity.

However, the hardest day on the job was when they were assigned to find the kidnapped children of a Polish town, track the culprits all the way to Norway, only to find more than just the few dozen toddlers and school-age children they were looking for. A four story building, with nearly a hundred rooms, filled with countless babies and young children, who had been abandoned as soon as the word got around that Captain America and her team were on the hunt for whoever worked there. An orphanage? No, the clothes and pictures left behind showed that several young women lived in this house as well.

When Stephanie opened up to find one of the many nurseries, she found children as old four hiding behind the bookshelves, under the beds, and tucking themselves into the corners of the room. She put her shield and weapons away and slowly approached one little blonde girl trying to hide behind a chair.
“<It’s alright, I’m not going to hurt you.>” She cooed softly in German, slowly croaching to her knees and sweetly smiling at her. When that didn’t ease up the girl’s hesitation, she pulled off her A-marked helmet which let her hair fall to her shoulders, “<My name is Stephanie, and I’m here to help.>”

Slowly, the children came out of their hiding spots, most of them blonde, all of them with blue or green eyes.

“<Are you a mommy?>” One of the little girls in a white collared dress and single braid asked.

“<No.>” Stephanie answered, feeling a small jerk in her heart.

“<Are you going to be a mommy?>” The girl asked, like this was a very important question to her.

“<Someday, hopefully.>” Stephanie answered honestly.

“<You look like a mommy.>” The girl responded.

“<What makes me look like a mommy?>” Stephanie kept smiling, even though now she could feel something very strange was going on.

“<You have blonde hair, and you have blue eyes. The ladies said that those are what make a good mommy.>” She answered.

Almost immediately, Stephanie understood what she meant, and so she was immediately horrified.

“<Do you know where our mommies are?>” A different girl, with a short bob, asked.

“<I’m going to help you find your mommies.>” Stephanie announced to all of them, “<Just stay calm, and come with me.>”

She went to all the rooms and gathered all the children she could find, singling out the Polish children they were told to find and keeping them in one group.

“Peggy, what is this place?” She asked as she tenderly held a small baby boy wrapped in a blanket that she found in one of the rows of bassinets set up in one of the wings. The child couldn’t be more than six months old, and he rested against her chest so comfortably. Since Stephanie had taken control of getting all the children to safety, and told Bucky and the rest of the Commandoes to help her, that left Peggy with the job of finding clues in the office drawers.

“I found birth certificates, racial purity certificates, family records…” Peggy explained, with her voice going soft and heavy as she pulled out the papers one by one, “…and some diaries in the bedroom drawers. Stephanie…I think this is a Lebensborn facility, for breeding Aryan children.”

“So they’re not all orphans. That means we can just find their families and take them home.” Stephanie said hopefully, as she bounced the baby in her arms.

“It’s not that simple. We can return the kidnapped children, but some of these children were given to the SS by unwed mothers. I doubt they’ll all be willing to take them back.” Peggy could see that this was breaking Stephanie’s heart, and it hurt her to say it, but it needed to be said.

“But…they’re perfect.” Stephanie started tearing up, “They’re healthy, and they’re….racially pure or whatever. The parents must’ve known what they were doing here…how could they not want them?” Stephanie’s voice trembled, more in anger than in sadness. In this one house, she found plenty of children she would love to take home with her, but it couldn’t be done, not now. There was always
something holding her back from the children she wanted. The doctors told her no. Her body told her no. The adoption centers who looked at her and Bucky’s shabby unfinished apartment told her no. This war and her duty to the nation that kept her overseas meant that a family would have to wait, even though this baby needed her right now.

Once Bucky helped load a truck full of children telling them that they would be good hands soon, he rushed over to find Stephanie, since he knew how sensitive she would be to this discovery. When he saw her clutching the infant tightly to her chest, silently crying on the office couch with Peggy softly shushing and holding her shoulders, he got a little teary-eyed himself and joined them.

“Stephanie, it’s time to go.” Bucky kissed her cheek, and made a futile attempt to take the infant out of her arms before she got too attached, “Steph, these kids are going to be okay. We’ll find them good homes if they don’t have one already.”

She rode with the baby in her lap as she sat in the back of the truck on the way back to their base. It turned out that this particular baby boy was kidnapped from a hospital in France, so “Michel” did have extremely grateful parents that were overjoyed to learn that he was alive and well. Stephanie was only finally able to let go of him when she saw the weeping mother desperate to have him in her arms again. The woman hugged and kissed Stephanie, thanking her for the miraculous return of her son.

“I never let him out of my sight.” She said, comforted in seeing the mother hold her baby close.

“You’re a true hero, Captain.” The mother kissed her once more on her cheek.

Even long after they officially completed that mission, Stephanie would check in once in a while to see which of the children had found families. She even wrote to baby Michel’s family once in a while. Of course, it had to wait until she had free time, which didn’t come very often.

Still, even on their tight schedules, she and her friends made time for each other. Birthdays came and went, and Stephanie made everyone personalized birthday cards with caricatures of themselves.

“I think even my moustache has a moustache.” Howard gave a pleased chuckle as he tucked the cherished card into his shirt pocket.

“That’s a lot of detail on my lips.” Peggy smiled and kept hers in her personal things by her cot.

On their wedding anniversary, she and Bucky were given a night to themselves. Sure they were stationed out in the forests of Poland at the time, but the Howling Commandoes took their business elsewhere, leaving the married couple their privacy in the trees and leaf-covered grounds near a flowing stream.

Before she even realized it, a whole year had passed, and they’d destroyed most of the Hydra bases they knew of. They realized that Dr. Zola, the same doctor who experimented on Bucky, was the Red Skull’s number two, so the closer they got to finding him, they closer they got to finding Schmidt and the head Hydra base that would not grow back once they cut it off. Every day, she armed herself, ready to face Red Skull again, and next time, he wouldn’t escape.
“Remember when I made you ride the Cyclone at Coney Island?” Bucky reminisced as he stared down the long narrow zipline in the frozen high mountains.

“Yeah, and I threw up?” Stephanie smiled, remembering the days when she thought stained dresses were an absolute crisis.

“This isn’t pay back, is it?” Bucky squeezed his belt and glanced briefly at the rapids beneath the tracks.

“Now why would I do that?” Stephanie also took a look at the zipline, silently chuckling that this thing actually made him nervous, when they both knew that they’d survived far worse than a quick slide down a securely attached wire.

“You were right. Dr. Zola’s on the train.” Gabe informed them, as he pressed the radio to his ear, attentively translating the intercepted message, “Hydra dispatchers gave him permission to open up the throttle. Wherever he’s going, they must need him bad.”

Steph gave Bucky that “go-time” gesture of her shoulder and slipped on her helmet and prepared her gear. This was the big one, for the mission and for all of their personal grudges against Zola.

“Let’s get going because they’re moving like the devil.” Monty warned, pulling his alarmed gaze away from his binoculars.

“We only got about a ten second window. If you miss that window…” Stephanie told the team as she gripped tightly on the handlebars, “…we’re bugs on a windshield.”

“Mind the gap,” Monty gave a last warning.

“Better get moving, bugs!” Dum Dum got everyone riled up as Steph prepared herself to jump.

On Jacques’s signal, she flew across the wire, with Bucky and the rest following directly behind her. Once they were aligned directly with the speeding train, they let go and landed securely on top of it. Steph and Bucky entered through the first door they could find while the others split up and either stood guard or went to another car. Slowly and attentively, they snuck through the racks of weapon containers, keeping their eyes and ears out for any Hydra soldiers coming their way. However, the only sound they could hear was the chug of the train.

Suddenly, when Stephanie stepped a little too far ahead of Bucky, a door whooshed shut in between them. She quickly ran back and tried to punch the door open, especially when she saw Bucky was shooting at someone from across his car, but soon a more dangerous threat was at hand. A large masked soldier holding what looked like two giant bazookas came her way, but the rising whir of the powering up machines alerted her in time for her to shoot at him and hide behind the stacks of weaponry so that he nearly missed.

“Stop her! Fire again!” She heard the strongly accented weasel-like voice command over the intercom.

Steph counted the seconds it took for him to recharge his weapon, and popped out and back in so that he’d use up the two shots and give her time to make her move. As the high-pitched buzzing of it rose in tone, she ran for the sliding hook that slipped her across the length of the car just in time for the shots to hit the shield and her legs to kick his chest so that he was knocked flat. With a fierce
clench of her teeth, she whacked him across the face with the sharp side of the shield. She figured the guns might be strong enough to break the lock mechanism on the sliding door, so she fired one solid shot at it.

When she ran back to the door in front of Bucky’s car, she found him sweating and taking a few more shots until his gun clicked empty. As he struggled with it, he pushed himself against the wall with a subtle panic in his shaking cheeks. Quickly, she ejected the magazine from her own gun and knocked her elbow against the door, to which it miraculously opened. With one quick supportive smile, she tossed the saving grace to her husband and ran directly towards the weapons boxes, knocking one in the way of the Hydra soldier attacking Bucky, distracting him long enough so that Bucky could shoot him down.

“I had him on the ropes.” Bucky groaned, his finger still hot on the trigger.

“I know.” Steph responded, before hearing that dreaded buzz behind her and pushed Bucky behind her and the shield, yelling, “Get down!”

The shield took a good part of the hit and sent them both to the floor, but the wall of the train took an even bigger hit, disintegrating and leaving a gaping hole. Steph had been pushed back to the opposite side, landing face down on the hard metal and making her ears ring just long enough to hear Zola give more orders on the intercom.

“Fire again! Kill them, now!”

When Steph regained her senses, she saw Bucky jumping back up and holding her shield. Then she saw the big goon shoot at him and knock him through the big hole.

“No!” She screamed, retrieving her shield and throwing it with the strength to knock the goon out for good this time. She ripped her helmet off and looked out the rip of the train, crying her husband’s name when saw him clinging for dear life to the wobbling rail on the car behind them.

She climbed the rail as fast as she could, shouting for him to hang on. Just a little bit further and she could reach him. The rail she clung to should have been strong enough for the both of them. She reached her arm out, pleading, “Grab my hand!”

The railing clinked loudly as it unhinged off the train. She didn’t even get to touch his hand that reached out for her. His screaming as he helplessly fell echoed in her mind for much longer than it rang in the mountains. She watched the opportunity to join him slip away as the train sped too far for her to land anywhere near him. She didn’t even get to see if he landed in the water or on the rocks, not that it mattered at this altitude. She waited for several horrible seconds, hoping that she would wake up from a cruel nightmare, but to her horror, this was reality’s doing. She sobbed harder with every breath, as if crying hard enough would give her a redo and let her take that fall, but knowing that it wouldn’t only made her cry harder. She didn’t let go of the rail until she was pulled off by the Commandos and buried in a sorrowful hug, long after Zola was caught and the train had been stopped.

Stephanie didn’t return with the rest of the group for the mission report; she took off on her own to the tavern where they had gathered them together and first asked them to join her team. To her dull surprise, the place had been all but destroyed, along with the rest of the block. She almost took comfort in how perfect the ambiance was. She went behind the bar herself and grabbed herself a glass and the strongest liquor that hadn’t shattered and stained the floor.

All of the Commandos had given their strongest condolences and offered to go with her, but she felt like she needed this time to be alone. Even when Peggy came looking for her, as Stephanie expected,
she didn’t run up to hug her like she usually would. She just glanced at her to acknowledge her presence and poured herself another drink.

“Dr. Erskine said that…” Stephanie sniffled through her congestion, “…this serum wouldn’t just affect my muscles. It would affect my cells, create a protective system of regeneration and healing… which means…I can’t get drunk. Did you know that?”

Peggy pulled up a seat from the bar next to her table, “Your metabolism burns four times faster than the average person. He thought it could be one of the side effects.”

“Did he tell you about the other side effects?” Stephanie asked, with the burning pain inside her putting a sting in her words, “Like how it amplified my hormonal responses? So that when I love someone, it’s the most potent and intoxicating feeling there is? So that when I feel pain, it’s like my body is literally being torn apart?”

“Stephanie, I can’t imagine how you feel right now.” Peggy tried to reach for her hand, but Steph wasn’t ready to be touched yet.

“Did you know…”Stephanie cupped her red and burning eyes in her hands, “…that I ovulate twice as much as the average woman? Most people have one or two eggs per cycle, but me? 3-4 eggs per cycle. Increases my fertility by a longshot.”

“I…didn’t know that.” Peggy answered honestly.

“That’s what I wanted.” Stephanie uncovered her tear-soaked face, and bunched her fists tightly close to her mouth, “Bucky and I wanted to start a family a long time ago, but I couldn’t do it. I wasn’t strong enough, so I lost it. After I was chosen, I asked Dr. Erskine if this serum could help me have children, and he said it could. Now I can have as many children as I want, but I don’t have… him…”

Peggy’s eyes teared up herself, but she kept her breathing steady, wanting to be strong for her, needing to be strong for the both of them. She had promised Bucky and herself to be there in Steph’s time of need when Bucky couldn’t. Even though they both agreed that Stephanie was the strongest person they knew, they also knew that she needed more than her shield to protect her. Peggy had more than enough tears to shed, after all Bucky was a good friend to her as well, but she saved them for another time. Right now, Stephanie needed help standing up.

“It wasn’t your fault.” Peggy said, sympathetically yet assertive.

“Did you read the reports?” Stephanie asked.

“Yes.”

“Then you know that’s not true.” She sank into her seat, with her eyes focused on her drink.

“You did everything you could.” Peggy said, even though she knew how cliché it sounded, because it was the truth. She asked, almost harshly, “Did you believe in your husband? Did you respect him?”

Stephanie looked up, surprised at her, but kept silent as the answers should have been obvious.

“Then stop blaming yourself. Allow Bucky the dignity of his choice. We both damn well knew you were worth it.” Peggy almost growled, and quickly realized she had failed to keep herself from shedding one big tear. She’d also grabbed Stephanie’s forearm without realizing it, but Stephanie didn’t seem to mind now. In fact, Stephanie had stopped crying. Peggy was right. Stephanie wasn’t
to blame for this. It was Hydra. It was always Hydra. They killed Dr. Erskine. They captured Bucky. They killed Bucky. As long as there was one head of Hydra sneaking around, she could never hope for a family of her own.

“I’m going after Schmidt.” Stephanie declared firmly, “I’m not going to stop until all of Hydra’s dead or captured.”

“You won’t be alone.” Peggy took her hand and squeezed it.
“Johann Schmidt belongs in a bughouse. He thinks he’s a god and he’s willing to blow up half the world to prove it, starting with the USA.” Colonel Phillips pointed to their map that had been filled up with string and tacks to show all the routes they’d tracked.

“Schmidt’s working with powers beyond our capabilities.” Howard took his seat with the team, “If he gets across the Atlantic, he will wipe out the entire Eastern seaboard in an hour.”

Peggy would’ve thought he was exaggerating if she didn’t know what Schmidt was capable of. All this chasing was going to come to an end one way or another, so she just had to remain calm and hope that Stephanie could come up the right plan to save the day, as she always did.

“How much time we got?” Gabe asked.

“According to my new best friend, under 24 hours.” Colonel Phillips had taken his sweet time interrogating Zola. He tried to bargain with him, and warned him that he was being much nicer than the Captain would be, considering he just cost them her beloved husband. Zola was truly a believer of the Red Skull’s vision, but still gave them the information they wanted, convinced that it was too late for them to stop them now, anyhow.

“Where is he now?” Dernier asked.

“Hydra’s last base is here,” Phillips held up grainy pictures of a mountainside with a small metal doors and windows barely visible, “in the Alps, 500 feet below the surface.”

“So what are we supposed to do?” Morita grumbled as the pictures were passed around to the group, “It’s not like we can just knock on the front door.”

“Why not?” Stephanie asked loudly from the head of the table, earning the attention from the whole team. She looked through all the papers and maps. She’d barged through the front door before, why not do it again? If they were running out of time, they shouldn’t waste the little that was left tiptoeing around.

“That’s exactly what we’re going to do.”

Stephanie brushed past everyone in the furious strut to her motorcycle, locking her eyes on the path ahead. With a quick buckle of her helmet and securing of her shield, she revved the engines with a fierce growl and sped off into the forests. Soon, she alerted the nearby Hydra goons who quickly tailed behind her. Luckily, her shield covered her entire back, protecting her from all the gunfire behind her. Still, she had to get them all off her back. With the flip of a switch, a long wire shot out and stuck between two trees, tripping two henchmen right off their bikes. Another button released the flamethrower out of her tail pipes, which set one guy completely on fire and another screaming off of his burning bike. See? She told Peggy that addition to the bike was a good idea. The two remaining goons sped ahead of her, giving her the opportunity to rush in behind them and sabotage their gas pipes, making them explode as soon as she sped off.

Now that all the threats behind her were taken care of, she moved her shield to the front of the bike. The big tank guns shot at her but with her zigzag movements, they always missed. Once she was directly in front of it, she shot from her cannons to make it explode. Even though that pathway was
now blocked by flaming wreckage, she drove up the ramps where the smaller guns were, giving her enough air to fly into the enemy territory, where havoc was already being wreaked.

Everyone who saw her was aiming at her, and the doors to the base were completely sealed. It would take a big hit to make a hole, so it looked like she would have to sacrifice the bike. She leaped off flipped over the large tank in front of her, knocking the goon on it down to the ground. She threw her shield like a spinning disc, knocking the approaching enemies in the face and spinning right into the air for her to catch. The bike exploded as soon as it ran into the barrack walls, disintegrating part of the wall with it. As tried to run towards the opening, she tried to fight off every guard that came her way, picking them off one by one. However, soon she was surrounded by two larger goons with double-barreled flamethrowers that trapped her in a ring of fire. Rather than hit her with the flames, they stalled for time as dozens and dozens of guards surrounded her, aiming at her once the fire was gone. Shit, that little trick worked like a charm, and there was nowhere to run. She stood still as two of the surrounding goons came up to her and handcuffed her, holding her arms to her back and some holding her shoulders down. A handful of them still kept their guns up as they lead her into the building, officially captured.

They took her down the hallways to a large, dimly-lit office, presumably the Red Skull’s. Sure enough, her ears stung with the bitter sound of his voice. She pushed her jaw forward and kept her teeth clenched under her tight lips.

“Arrogance may not be a uniquely American trait, but I must say you do it better than anyone.” Schmidt strolled up with the loud clobber of his boots, which was the most intimidating thing about him. The rest of him was dressed quite casually in a black button up shirt and matching suspenders. She guessed this was the base that he most considered a “home.” She lifted her chip up at him.

“But there are limits to what even you can do, Captain.” Red Skull stood in front of her, taking a moment to look her up and down once again, “Or did Erskine tell you otherwise?”

“He told me you were insane.” Stephanie answered frankly, staring into his eyes, refusing the shame he wanted to put on her.

“Ah…” Red Skull looked down, looking genuinely affected for a brief moment, “He resented my genius, and tried to deny me what was rightfully mine, but he gave you everything. So…what made you so special?”

Stephanie smiled, feeling Dr. Erskine’s warm memory fill her with confidence, “Nothing. I’m just a kid from Brooklyn.”

Red Skull didn’t take being mocked too kindly. He grit his teeth and punched her and then slapped her with the back of hand, hitting her cheeks with his knuckles. One more solid punch to her gut knocked the breath right out of her. The goons held her to her knees on the ground as she gasped for air and coughed. After this long, she’d almost forgotten how much it hurt to be socked by someone stronger than her, yet she still looked up with that defiant glow in her eyes, just like back in New York.

“I can do this all day.” She growled.

“Oh, of course you can, Mausi. Of course you can, but unfortunately, I am on a tight schedule.” The Red Skull grabbed her by the chin, stroking it as he aimed his weapon at her, the gun emitting that horrible powering up sound.

However, without a moment to spare, the Howling Commandoes could be vaguely seen riding through the air from the windows, distracting Schmidt long enough for Stephanie to make her move.
“So am I.” She pulled the goon holding her arm right in front of her, quick enough for him to him to be disintegrated when Schmidt took the shot. As the Commandoes broke through the windows, shooting from their machine guns, Schmidt fled like always. As the team shot down every goon in the room, Monty tossed Stephanie her shield.

“Here, you might need this!”

“Thanks!” She chirped before running into the halls, after the Red Skull. He wasn’t going to slip past her this time. Now that the team was here, that meant that all of Colonel Phillips forces were storming the base. The goal was to come in through every entrance, blocking every chance for Schmidt to escape. Her mission was to chase after him now that her team had everyone else covered. She used the trail of fallen men to catch up to him, but he armed himself so that she would hold up her shield, blocking her view and making her slower. Once he was in her sight, she threw the shield at him but he escaped past a door, which the shield got stuck in between. To make matters worse, the henchman with the flamethrowers showed up, spooking her and making her hide in the small door entrance space. He was too far to charge at, and the flames just kept going, trapping her as he got closer and closer.

Suddenly, she heard the rattling of a machine gun mowing him down from behind, damaging his weapon which set his whole body aflame and groaning on the floor. She peeked once the flames died down, and saw her favorite teammate armed and dangerous, with soldiers running in behind her.

Steph walked up to her, grinning in relief, “You’re late.”

Peggy found herself at a loss for breath as Stephanie approached. She never quite got over how tall she was and how tough she looked in her suit. Still, she reminded her, “Weren’t you about to-“

“Oh, right!” Stephanie ran off to find Schmidt, grabbing her shield in the process. The hallway led her to a hangar, where she could hear the buzzing of jets slowly taking off. She ran through the screaming mess of henchmen, knocking each one out of her way as she charged towards the plane. She found a metal chain hanging from the ceiling and swung over their heads getting her with a few yards of the plane. As long as she just got a little faster, she could catch it. Just a little more. Her mouth dropped in horror as the plane gained momentum and got farther away, and she slowed down as she was losing energy.

Once again, right as she almost thought she was going to lose, Peggy was there with Colonel Phillips, driving up in a screeching black car, yelling, “Get in!”

She climbed over the car door and right into the seat, plopping herself down as the car sped off so fast she had to watch her neck. As the hangar doors opened, they saw how little time they had left. Phillips found the turbo button that ignited the extra engines on the car and sent them racing even faster than the plane, giving them the chance to catch up with it. Stephanie stood in her seat, ready to climb to the hood.

“Keep it steady!” she ordered, locating where she’d grab on as soon as they were close enough.

“Wait!” Peggy yelled. She knew there wasn’t much time left, so she wasn’t going to let Stephanie get away from her without knowing how much she loved her. She grabbed one of the straps on her suit and pull Steph’s lips tightly to hers. Stephanie was running on so much adrenaline already, she didn’t know how much hotter her cheeks could burn. She accepted the kiss, even if she wasn’t quite sure what it meant, but she knew she would have to find out later. After all, she had always wondered what Peggy’s soft lips felt like, and the answer was more than she bargained for. To her, Peggy felt like…home.
“Go get ‘em.” Peggy smiled proudly at her.

Stephanie looked stunned at her, and briefly at Phillips, who only responded, “I’m not kissing ya.”

Now that she was properly motivated, Stephanie stepped over the windshield and crouched along the hood of the car, narrowly avoiding the propeller blades by pressing flat against the car. Once she was close enough, she leaped for the landing gear wheel and clung on for dear life just as the plane reached lift off.

As she ascended into the air, she looked back and saw the car spin around, stopping just at the edge of the mountain, safe. She could see Peggy looking up at her, but their views of each other got smaller and smaller as the plane zoomed farther. Still, their last glimpses of each other’s faces told them to wait. Wait for me, so we can go home, together.
See You There

As the landing gears retracted into the plane, Stephanie found herself in the cargo hold. She jumped over the rails and skulled around, finding the keys to Red Skull's plan for domination: several large bombs labeled with the American cities they targeted, including New York City. Upon closer inspection, she found that these bombs had cockpits, indicating that it required a pilot to sacrifice for each one. Without pilots, they couldn’t reach their targets. And soon enough, there they were, clanging down the steps.

Stephanie hid on top of the large wheel until they were in her sight, then she held the metal bar above her head and swung a kick that sent a henchman flying off the railing. That alerted the other pilots, distracting them from their mission and making them come after her, one of which whipped out a pocket knife. Sorry Howard, looks like they came prepared after all. She dodged the incoming blade and pinned the goon’s torso down on the rail, getting him out of the way so she could kick down the guy running towards her. Another tried to flee from the fight, but Steph grabbed the knife out of the first goon’s hand and threw it at the runaway, nailing him right on the back before he could reach his bomb.

The first goon still put up a fight, throwing punches that she deflected, but quickly ran to his designated bomb. He was already preparing to enter by grabbing the rails right above the cockpit, but Steph grabbed the lever that opened the chamber from underneath, releasing the targetless missile and dropping the screaming pilot thousands of feet. The other two henchmen that came at her tried to throw punches, but when she focused on one and threw him down the opening, the other escaped to his missile, the one headed for New York. She sprinted and leaped toward the cockpit, but she prepared to jam her shield into the glass cover, another henchman jumped on her from behind, tossing her shield off and pinning both of their bodies to the missile as it launched from the plane.

She tried to knock the henchman off her back with backwards kicks and swinging elbows, but he clung on like a hook. The pilot tried to swing her off with sharp spins and dives, but he only managed to slide her to the front of the missile. When he flew upwards, Steph and the goon slid across the length, but only she was able to grab a hold of the rudder for safety, the goon fell right into the propeller and was instantly sliced into a million pieces, leaving a misty trail of his blood. Horrified at the sight, she clung to the rudder for dear life, fighting against the rush of air trying to pull her in. She stretched her arm as far as she could until she pressed the button opening the cockpit. Before the pilot could react, she yanked the big red lever that ejected him out of the missile, leaving the space unoccupied for her to throw herself in and shut the cockpit door.

Once she was secure and at the controls, she looked back to the big plane where Red Skull remained. Even if she sent this bomb into the water and foiled his plan right now, it wouldn’t stop him from cracking up a new one. As long as he was alive, he was dangerous. She had to go back. To get back to where the missile was deployed, she had to turn it in a circle, flying directly in front of the plane’s view and catching Red Skull’s eye, as she could tell when blue energy bolts were fired in her direction. Luckily, she managed to dodge them all, but when she finally positioned herself behind the plane, she saw just how tiny the opening was. She wasn’t even sure if it would fit. Still, she had no other choice but to try. Clenching her teeth and squinting, she accelerated further and slipped the missile through the back of the plane. By absolute miracle, it fit and didn’t explode upon impact.

Now that the immediate threat was taken care of, all that was left was to face the Red Skull himself. She would make sure he wouldn’t get off this plane, even if it meant she wouldn’t either. She retrieved her shield from the launch bay and snuck through the empty halls until she reached the plane’s cockpit. It was suspiciously quiet, so either Red Skull was too focused on the controls to
make a noise, or there was a trap waiting for her. She focused on the head chair at the front of the cockpit, creeping towards it with her shield covering her, expecting him to spin around armed and ready to fire. However, it came to a point where there was no way he’d be able to miss the sound of her footsteps. Was he even here? Did he escape? Was she too late?

Suddenly, the sickeningly familiar whirr of the energy guns warned her to turn around just in time for the shield to catch the blast of blue light. She looked across to see him with a smug half-smile and squint, putting the few muscles he had left in his face to work.

“You don’t give up, do you?” Red Skull taunted.

“Nope!” She charged towards him, shielding herself from every blast until she knocked the weapon out of his hand. While ordinary henchman would take a swing from her shield head-on, Red Skull dodged backwards fast enough that it just missed the point of his chin. Since she wasn’t used to missing, the weight of her shield coming back around threw off her balance, giving Red Skull the chance to punch her in the side and then her shoulder, shaking her entire arm until she dropped her shield. He threw her on her back with an evil grin, making her yelp when her head hit the ground.

She rolled on her hands and knees, and Schmidt tried to kick her back down, but when his foot came her way, she grabbed it, throwing him off balance and making him fall on her for support, to which she pushed off to get herself back on her feet and throw him against the power chamber. He punched her in the face, which sent her to the floor again. She looked up to see Schmidt trying to crawl on top of her, and grabbed a big canister that was next to her to knock him out of the way.

She reached her arms around him and pulled him back in a chokehold which made him audibly gag and struggle. She threw their bodies to roll over the power chamber, letting him go so she could get her shield back. As she tried to swing at Schmidt, he punched her gut and grabbed the shield from her, knocking her face with it. He pressed it against her body, trapping her against the power chamber, bringing his face close to hers so she could feel his rank breath. His head tilted towards hers in a disturbing way, like his lips wanted to make contact. She mustered up all her rage to headbutt him, regaining control of her weapon and using her weight to propel Schmidt in the air until he landed in his chair.

The force from the chair knocked the lever on the control panel, sending the plane straight down and the Captain and the Red Skull straight up to support bars on the roof, where they continued their struggle against gravity and each other. Red Skull managed to kick her across the ceiling, making her hit the metal plate with a loud, “Oof!”

Schmidt climbed to his control panel set the plane back in balance, and also set the course to autopilot. Stephanie hit the ground with a large thud. She hid behind various machines and cargo, looking for a safe way to the front, or at least her shield.

“You could have the power of the gods!” Red Skull declared, pulling out his pistol and shooting at the moving figure of blue, “But you wear a flag on your chest and think you fight a battle of nations! I have seen the future, Captain. There are no flags. Only the perfect race, from you and me!”

“Not my future!” Steph yelled back, and tumbled towards her shield and picked it up before a shot could hit her. She tossed it right at his stomach, knocking him back with the dull clang of the Vibranium into the power chamber, which had finally taken damage. Red Skull struggled back to his feet, but now focused on the blue radiating cube knocked out of place.

“What have you done?” Red Skull growled, picking up the cube and squeezing it in his grip. He was so entranced with it, he completely ignored her gaping, squeezing the rail and frozen in shock. The cube glowed brighter and buzzed loudly, shooting puffs of blue energy that got bigger until it opened a cloud in the air that looked like a portal to another galaxy.
Stephanie was awestruck, and considered that the blows to her head may have been more severe than she thought. This was beyond anything she imagined possible. She watched in horror as the light crawled across Schmidt’s skin, disintegrating in a burning beam of light. He screamed as the light devoured him, and a beam of light burst up into the stars, taking him with it. Soon, the Red Skull and portal were gone, but the cube remained, burning a hole through the plane and falling into the ocean.

Stephanie figured she would deal with the cube later, right now there was still a missile lodged into the plane, and a target that the plane was set on. She removed her helmet and sat that the controls, watching the radar blink “New York City” and an arrow headed straight for it. She fiddled with the controls, but nothing would work. It was completely out of her control.

“Come in, this is Captain Rogers. Do you read me?” Stephanie prayed that the radio still worked.

“Stephanie! Is that you? Are you alright?!” She wanted to cry she was so grateful to hear the voice of an angel.

“Peggy! Schmidt’s dead!” Stephanie reported as she tried fiddling with the controls some more.

“What about the plane?” Peggy asked, sounding more panicked than ever.

“That’s a little tougher to explain.” Stephanie’s body went stiff and heavy as she failed to fix anything and found herself running out of options.

“Give me your coordinates and I’ll find you a safe landing site.” Peggy offered in a hopeful tone.

“There’s not going to be a safe landing…” Stephanie looked on the explosives still in the plane, as shown on the screen, “…but I can try to force it down.”

“I-I’ll get Howard on the line. He’ll know what to do.” Peggy stuttered, trying to find anything that would work. They had always found some way to make things work before.

“There’s not enough time!” Stephanie exclaimed, letting the tears pour down her face, “It’s moving too fast and it’s headed for New York!”

And now Peggy had run out of things to say. The painful silence finally made them admit there was no other way. Colonel Phillips escorted himself and Morita out of the room, leaving them to their privacy.

“I gotta put her in the water.” Stephanie admitted calmly.

“Please, don’t do this. We have time. We can work it out.” Peggy pleaded, her sweet voice going soft.

“Right now, I’m in the middle of nowhere. If I wait any longer, a lot of people are gonna die.” Stephanie explained. With a heavy heart, she choked out, “Peggy…this is my choice.”

Steph thought about how least this would mean she wouldn’t have to endure the pain of going back to her empty apartment without Bucky. She failed to join him in the mountains, but now she had another chance, and she would save the city while she was at it. She pulled her compass out of her pocket and opened it, setting it on the control panel and revealing a picture of the three of them: her, Peggy and Bucky, laughing it up at the Christmas party after Dugan started dancing on the tables. The way they held onto each other trying to contain themselves made them look like one unit, one happy family. She kept her eyes on that image as she threw the level forward, dropping into a straight dip.
“Peggy…” She called out.

“I’m here.” Peggy’s voice sounded like she was almost ready to cry herself. The worst part of this decision was how much she was looking forward to going home with her.

“We’re gonna need a raincheck on that dance.” Stephanie looked ahead to see an iceberg that was waiting below her.

“Alright…” Peggy sniffled and swallowed a painful lump, “…a week, next Saturday at the Stork Club.”

 “…You got it.” Stephanie pretended like she was back home, penciling a date on her calendar that the church gives away every Christmas. She’d have to pick a dress to wear. She didn’t want to be too formal and go in her uniform, even though that’s what she was going to make Bucky wear since he wore his so well.

“8 o’ clock on the dot. Don’t you dare be late.” Peggy asserted, “Understood?”

Well that would mean Steph would have to make dinner a little bit earlier than usual. They wouldn’t want to drink and dance on empty stomachs. Bucky always got home around six, so if she got the groceries right after lunch, she could cook dinner, press their nice clothes right before he got home, leave it out on the bed to cool off while they ate, so that getting ready would take less time and they’d be able to leave a good half hour before eight.

“You know…” Steph added, “I don’t know how to dance the lead part. I’ve never danced with a girl before.”

Peggy’s laughter was audible over the growing static, “I’ll show you how. Just be there.”

“We’ll have the band play something slow.” Stephanie focused on the compass picture, even when she could feel the ice growing close, “I’d hate to step on your-“

The signal was lost, leaving complete static on the line.

“Stephanie?” Peggy pleaded hopelessly for a response, just one more second of her voice, “Stephanie?”

Peggy’s eyes finally let go, dropping thick tears on the controls as she pushed everything hoping to bring her back, “Steph?”

When it finally sunk in that she was truly gone, Peggy hid her face in her numb hands, pressing her palms against her soaked cheeks.
V-E day was a bittersweet day for the whole SSR. The mission was accomplished, and everyone could go home to their families, or start one if they didn’t have one yet. The Howling Commandoes got together for one last round, clinking their glasses together for a solemn toast.

“To the Captain, and her Sergeant.”

Peggy and Howard didn’t go with them to the tavern. Both of them claimed that it was because Col. Phillips was keeping them at the base to pack up all the tech, but honestly, they knew they would lose their composure. They didn’t even have a body to bury. There was nothing to kiss or say goodbye, too.

“I’m going to find her, Peggy, and I want you to come with me.” Howard told her as they loaded all his gear into the truck.

“Howard…we’ve tried everything. We looked for months, and we couldn’t find her. Even if she survived the crash, by now…it’s too late.” Peggy explained, her voice getting congested.

“I know. Still…” Howard held Peggy’s hands, “…our girl deserves to come home.”

Peggy squeezed his hands, but turned her head away, shaking it.

“Please, Peg.” Howard started pleading with a whisper, “Just one more try. I don’t want to do this alone.”

Peggy pulled away entirely, folding her arms across her chest after wiping her nose, “She’s already home. She’s with him.”

Howard slammed the doors to the truck and tucked his hands into his pocket. As he slumly trailed to the driver’s seat, Peggy looked at him and couldn’t help but pity him.

“Howard,” She called back, not sure why, or if she had anything to say.

“I’ll…uh…let you know if I find anything.” Howard scratched his moustache, looking at her with his big sad brown eyes.

Peggy huffed and figured there was no point in even trying to keep herself poised right now, so she marched over to him and embraced him tightly, pressing into his back.

“You be safe out there, understand?” Peggy sniffled.

“You know my frequency. Just keep your radio on.” Howard rested his chin on her shoulder as he wrapped his arms around her.

Peggy watched the truck leave until it disappeared into the horizon, partially afraid that once he left her sight, she would never see him again. She knew it was irrational, but unfortunately, it was becoming a habit.

She returned to her post inside the bunker, sticking papers into files and files into boxes and boxes onto carts that would be carried off. As she handed off portfolios of maps and telegrams from Hydra bases long destroyed, Col. Phillips walked her way with a thick file in his hands. He didn’t say anything to her, just dropped the cardboard portfolio on the desk, with a quick sympathetic glare.
Peggy slowly opened the flaps, finding all of Stephanie’s paperwork back from when she was a just candidate for Project Rebirth. It was all here: her registration form, her disastrous physical exam, her test scores, legal waivers, everything that showed how much she put on the line to be here. On top of all that was the most precious thing Peggy could imagine, a picture of Stephanie when she was tiny and thin, squinting in the hot Jersey sun at Camp Lehigh in a standard white shirt with her dog tags dangling around her neck. Peggy touched the picture delicately, caressing it with her finger tips.

2011

The endless radio chatter rung in Stephanie’s ears. At first, she couldn’t decipher the words but knew it was someone talking. In her haze, she thought it was angels discussing her fate. She was supposed to be dead right now, right? The last thing she remembered was her head smashing against the glass pane at the front of the ship, giving her what was supposedly her fatal concussion, because she remembered the world fading to black as the snow crawled in to bury her.

If she was truly dead, it shouldn’t be this hard to move. She was supposed to have a heavenly body that was free of pain and could probably fly. If she was truly dead, she wouldn’t be able to feel this ache in her bones. If she was truly dead, Bucky would be here.

When she able to get a hold of her senses, she could hear keywords like “Dodgers” and “Evans Field” telling her it a baseball game. She opened her eyes to see a ceiling fan, like one in the hospital. She shifted around to get a look at the room, finding only the barest essentials. Something was off though. Everything looked too clean, like it was brand new or had every inch of the room scrubbed. It looked…staged.

She squeezed her fingers and toes to regain control of her muscles, which came surprisingly easy. She pulled herself to sit up on the edge of the bed, listening more to the radio broadcast of the game. It sounded suspiciously familiar. Her favorite team playing right as she woke up in this picture perfect room, it was enough to make her hair stand on ends. And maybe her eyes were just adjusting, but the city outside the window lacked any depth.

Suddenly, the doorknob shook, making Stephanie’s heart race.

“Good morning.” A young lady with very voluminous curls and dark auburn lipstick stepped inside, checking her watch, “Or should I say afternoon.”

The woman stood there, hands clasped together in front, only adding to the artificiality of the whole scene, like a doll in a dollhouse.

“Where am I?” Stephanie asked, secretly terrified and breathing deeply, ready to defend herself if she had to.

“You’re in a recovery room in New York City.” The lady answered with a smile too weak to be genuine. Her voice sounded a little off too. Of course, that had to be absolute bullshit. Without the radio, this place would be silent. If she were really in New York City, she’d be hearing traffic horns and yelling and birds and bicycle bells outside. Most of all, this game was extremely familiar to her for a reason.

“Where am I really?” Stephanie asked forcefully, pushing her bottom jaw forward.
The woman smiled harder, as if that would get Steph to cooperate, “I’m afraid I don’t understand.”

“The game. It’s from May 1941. I know because I was there.” Stephanie asserted.

Finally, the woman dropped her smile and looked with fear in her eyes, like her doll façade was on the edge of breaking.

“Now I’m gonna ask you again…” Stephanie slowly stepped up from the bed, towering over the woman, “Where am I?”

“Captain Rogers…” The woman muttered softly as she squeezed something in her hand.

“Who are you?!” Stephanie shouted, until two men in all black gear stormed in. She panicked and threw them into the wall, breaking it open, revealing that this high floored room was fake after all, and there was a way to escape.

“Captain Rogers, wait!” The woman called after her, which only made her sprint faster, through big metal doors. Was this a warehouse? Where was there to run to? She decided not to think about that now, and just keep running. Suddenly, she was in a hallway surrounded by men in black suits.

*All Agents, Code 13. I repeat, All Agents, Code 13.* The voice blared throughout the whole building. This definitely wasn’t Heaven, so maybe Father Bennigan was right and she landed herself in Hell after all. Well, if the Devil wanted her so badly, he’d have to catch her. She pushed every man out of her way, knocking them to the ground. She found the exit to the building, but only got more lost when she ran into the streets, seeing people in unusual clothes and cars in unusual shapes and colors. And lights. So many lights, blinking and changing colors. It was all one big blur as she ran into the only place that was even vaguely familiar. She knew this corner. She knew this gathering of the roads. Times Square. She finally stopped to take in her surroundings. Those lights were actually billboards that moved, and the buildings towered higher than ever before.

Now that she had stopped, the men in black surrounded her from every angle, and she shook and panted. Her blood had stopped flowing in her veins. A tall black man with an eyepatch approached her slowly.

“Look, I’m sorry about that little show back there.” The man was the first person so far to sound genuine, “We thought it best to break it to you slowly.”

“Break what?!” She exclaimed. Just tell her if she was dead or not. Tell her if this was Heaven, or Hell, or Purgatory, or whatever.

“You’ve been asleep, Cap. For over seventy years.”

Stephanie took a second to process what he said, and then she took another look at her surroundings. The future. That’s why everything looked so different, it moved on. The whole world had moved on without her. Cars got shinier and faster. TV screens got bigger. Hell, no wonder that “recovery room” looked so fake, no one there had probably ever been in a real hospital wing in the 40’s unless they were infants at the time. Seventy years, if he was telling the truth, then everyone she had known would probably be dead; Colonel Phillips for certain, all of the Howling Commandoes who were older than 30 probably didn’t live past 100, but maybe Howard was still alive, and Peggy….Peggy…

“You gonna be okay?” The man asked, once again, with genuine concern in his voice.

“Yeah…” She teared up, “Yeah, I just…I had a date.”
Within hours of waking up, Stephanie learned that S.H.I.E.L.D was the successor to the Strategic Scientific Reserve and had been for decades. Peggy and Howard had founded it in her honor, but Nick Fury didn’t tell her their fates outright. Instead, he handed her a pack of files and let her discover the past on her own time.

One by one, she saw her Howling Commandoes marked “Deceased,” but she took comfort in seeing the long lives they led. Howard’s was not so comforting though. He was killed in a car accident with his wife, who was far younger than him. His only son, Tony, was fresh out of college when he died, still a boy then, but a man now, older than Howard was when she last saw him. Peggy, thankfully, was still alive, but had long retired due to deteriorating health. Stephanie touched the picture on the file, where only the paper had aged, but her image remained young.

“I’m sorry I missed our date, I got cold feet.” She murmured to yellowing paper, but even with no one around, she rolled her eyes with how embarrassing that sounded. There was a number and address on the profile, but she wasn’t sure if this had been updated since her retirement, which was about a decade ago. Even if it was, Peggy had surely moved on. New friends, a husband, some children, everything she deserved and more. The last thing Stephanie wanted to do right now was scare an old lady. Perhaps another time.

She was lucky, she figured. Not everyone returns from the dead to have a new apartment and a job waiting for them. Most of the technology was understandable; it’s not like she had never seen a car or a phone before. Things were just shinier and didn’t need cords anymore.

Even if she was a household name after all these years, she could still walk through the streets without being recognized, as she discovered on her way to the library. Everyone expected bouncy curls, bright lipstick, and sparkling eyes when they thought of Captain America. No one would think this woman dressed like a school teacher with long-sleeved button-up green silk blouse and long navy blue pencil skirt and her hair in a sleek ponytail was the girl from their vintage pin-ups. As she grabbed an assortment of military history books, she finally noticed that she may have been overdressed. Most of the people around her were college-age students, wearing cotton shirts and camisoles, things that were supposed to go under your real clothes last time she checked. It didn’t offend her, but the thought of sticking out in these circumstances frightened her.

She took the seat facing the wall in the study area, isolating herself in the corner with at least ten books stacked around her. Korea, Vietnam, Iraq, Afghanistan, so many other countries that the America fought against while she was gone. She knew that she could never understand everything about these wars in one day, but she still left feeling sore in her chest. She really had believed that defeating Hydra would have created some era of peace, but that peace lasted barely a day. There would always be evil and war, that she knew, but now she felt like a fraud. Everyone saw Captain America as some great hero who could lead the nation to victory “if only she were here.” Now that she was back, people would expect that of her again, as if she had some magical power to vanquish all evil with one toss of her shield. Even if she couldn’t do that, she at least had to try.

That night, Stephanie sat on her new bed, looking around at her room. She hadn’t quite accepted it as
hers yet, so she felt like she had been kidnapped. Her thumping heart and burning skin made her too anxious to sleep, so she put on a set of sweat clothes provided for her in the closet and walked to S.H.I.E.L.D’s gym on the base.

She wrapped her hands and gave a go at the punching bag dangling near the boxing ring. She just needed to tucker herself out, that’s all. When she was tiny, she would feel proud by just making the thing budge, now watching it swing backwards was only mildly satisfying. Remembering how she used to be unlocked a whole flood of memories from the past. Bucky, Peggy, the Commandoes, everything she had called home was gone. She was discovering all these amazing things about the future, and no one to talk to. Even when she tired herself out, she was still going back to an empty apartment, which was the one thing she had been trying to avoid since the day Bucky was shipped off. Why didn’t she die like she was supposed to? Why didn’t crashing that damn plane doing anything it was supposed to do? Being here, being young, being so alone, it was worse than the hell she was expecting.

She broke the punching bag.

“Trouble sleeping?” Director Fury interrupted her just as she was placing a new bag on the hook.

“I slept for 70 years, sir. I think I’ve had my fill.” Stephanie kept punching, not facing him.

“Then you should be out, celebrating, seeing the world.” Director Fury suggested.

She knew he meant well, she really did, but she really didn’t like being told to celebrate. She was due a mourning period.

“When I went under, the world was at war.” She wiped the sweat of her forehead and took the wrapping off her rough hands, “I wake up, they say we won, they didn’t say what we lost.”

“We made some mistakes, some very recently.” Fury stood there, with a sheet of paper between his fingers.

“You here with a mission, sir?” She gave him a little more of her attention.

“I am.”

“Trying to get me back in the world?” She asked.

“Trying to save it.” Fury held the paper out to her so she could get a better look, on it was a picture of the glowing blue cube that had disintegrated the Red Skull before burning through the plane and getting lost in the ocean.

“Hydra’s secret weapon…” She whispered. According to the file, they had found it long before they found her, and they’d been keeping a hold of it ever since, until now.

“Howard Stark fished that out of the ocean when he was looking for you.” Fury explained. Stephanie shook when she heard that. If she didn’t feel horrible enough already, now she could see her friends treading through miles and miles of ice, trying to bring her back from the grave she dug for herself.

“He thought what we think. The Tesseract could be the key to unlimited sustainable energy. That’s something the world sorely needs.”

“Who took it from you?” She asked, resisting her urge to cry.
“He’s called Loki, he’s… not from around here. There’s a lot we’ll have to bring you up to speed on, if you’re in. The world has gotten even stranger than you already know.”

“At this point, I doubt anything would surprise me.” Stephanie sighed as she put away the equipment.

“Ten bucks says you’re wrong.” Director Fury sounded adamant that this was serious, which made it clear that he needed her to join in. It was worth a shot, it’s not like she had anything other plans to do good in this new world.

“There’s a debriefing packet waiting for you back at your apartment. Is there anything you can tell us about the Tesseract that we ought to know now?” Fury asked as she headed out.

“You should’ve left it in the ocean.”

A few days later

Aliens, Norse gods, spaceships, all of these things were real. Thor, the God of Thunder was currently sitting next to her and taking a big bite of shawarma, a dish she had never heard of until Tony Stark had mentioned it. Tony was kind of an asshole, what with telling her that everything special about her came out of a bottle, but she wasn’t so dense as not to see that he obviously had a chip on his shoulder that Howard had put there. The Howard that looked for her endlessly and founded S.H.I.E.L.D for memory must’ve put her on a pedestal. It made sense if Tony resented her for that. Right now, she didn’t think she was that special either. Still, even if he was a little rough around the edges, she knew there was a good heart in there, behind his shining metal contraption that crept her out at first until she realized it wasn’t his real heart.

On the other side of her, Natasha Romanoff, a Russian spy turned S.H.I.E.L.D agent, chewed her food slowly while poking her friend Clint Barton, another S.H.I.E.L.D agent, as he nodded off. These two were the masters of their craft, and were excellent team players, but still had a human side to them that she admired. If they ever invited her out to something, she’d probably say yes.

Across the table from her was Dr. Bruce Banner, another unfortunate victim of her “legacy.” Since the super soldier serum made her “perfect,” hundreds of scientists had try to recreate it over the years, with no one ever reaching Dr. Erskine’s level of success. The man could have strength that exceeded even hers, but only when enraged into his Hulk form, whereby he grew about a dozen times in size and turned green and unintelligible. At his normal size, however, he was more reserved, but very witty and kind. She liked that.

This was an odd team to say the least, but she could feel something special about them. They did just defeat an army of aliens together, that’s one thing she didn’t have in common with anyone else. As she rested her cheeks on her hands, exhausted from the long and insane battle, she weakly smiled.

Chapter End Notes

So the reason I pretty much skipped over all of the Avengers because I really like this story to focus on Stephanie’s perspective, and most of that movie doesn’t do that. My plan from the beginning was to do only The First Avenger and Winter Soldier, but I
decided to do just a couple selected bits from The Avengers that was important to her development and getting used to the future. The next chapter will be CATWS though!
The Black Widow

After about a year in New York City, S.H.I.E.L.D stationed Stephanie in Washington D.C, but when she had to find a new apartment, she had to finally confront the issue of her name. Legally, she was still Stephanie Barnes, but now she had the option to start anew by going back to Stephanie Rogers. Even if it had been almost 70 years since Bucky’s death, she’d only been living and breathing without him for one. Her love for him was the most perfect thing there could be, but that only made living alone even worse.

“You do whatever works for you. He’d want you to be happy.” Natasha advised as she helped pack up her things.

“What would going back to Rogers even do for me? When my father died, my mother didn’t go back to her maiden name. What kind of message would I be sending anyway? Hey, look at me, my husband is gone for good, so I’m back on the market and desperate. Not that I that’s what I think about other women.” Stephanie stirred the sugar in her coffee aggressively.

“To be honest, I thought that Captain America didn’t care about what others think of her.” Natasha said.

“Well, gossip and rumors would get to anybody after a certain point.” Stephanie tried to hold her mug delicately even though she wanted to squeeze it to pieces.

Natasha shrugged, “I suppose that’s true, especially since I’m sure you’ve had more than your fair share, being an icon and all.”

Stephanie weakly smiled and looked down at her cup, “Maybe we should trade? You can be Captain America, and I’ll be the Black Widow.”

“Aw, you beat me to it! I’ve been waiting to use that one all day.” Natasha chuckled.

Stephanie stared at the lease that was waiting for her signature on the counter, which was more intimidating that it should be.

“Look, if you want a direct answer from me, I say don’t change your name. If it’s stressing you out this much, you probably aren’t ready. No one’s pressuring you to do this right now.”

Stephanie took a deep breath and thought for a while, before finally taking a pen and signing on the dotted line.

D.C took some getting used to, but she felt as settled in as she could possibly be. It’s not like there wasn’t any place that was just like the way she remembered it. Even her morning run around the Washington Memorial revealed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial to her. As she ran sped past all those names carved in stone, she thought about how had she not been frozen and gotten the family she wanted, she and Bucky still probably would’ve had to watch their sons go out and fight. She mourned these hypothetical children already, imagining young twenty-something Bucky look-likes running to what was most likely their death in a humid foreign jungle, for a war she couldn’t justify as honorable.

When she could feel tears in her eyes, she harshly rubbed her eyes. She really had to stop doing this
to herself. Damn it, now she was just inventing misery. She knew as well as everyone else that she didn’t technically need to run this long every day, but she did it anyway to relax and try and clear her mind, if that was even possible.

Her mind finally came back to reality when she saw a man jogging in front of her. If she had stayed with her head in the clouds, she might’ve run into him.

“On your left.” She called out as she ran past him.

She didn’t want to end her run with her spirits low, so she decided to take a few more laps to see if she could get her endorphins running again. On the way, she passed by the same jogger again.

“On your left.” She warned again.

“Oh-huh, on my left, got it.” He responded this time. She surprisingly smiled when she thought she heard some attitude in his tone, which made her curious to see what he would do if she just so happened to zoom past him once more.

“Don’t say it. Don’t you say it!” The man warned as soon as she heard the quick thumping of her feet.

“On your left.” She chirped and held down her laughter as she passed him.

“C’mom!” He exclaimed from behind her, and she could hear him trying to pick up his pace and fail without even turning around. Well now she definitely felt better, all she needed was a good laugh.

“Need a medic?” She offered sweetly as soon as she found him huffing as he lay back against a tree. He laughed as soon as he saw her, “I need a new set of lungs. Girl, you just ran like 13 miles in thirty minutes.”

“Guess I got a late start.” She bit her lip in a smile, rocking a bit with her hands on her hips.

“Really? You should be ashamed of yourself. You should take another lap.” He caught his breath for another moment, “Did you take it? I assume you just took it.”

Okay, it was official. She liked this guy, and as she took a better look at him, she noticed the insignia on his sweatshirt, “What unit are you with?”

“58th Pararescue, but now I’m working down at the VA.” He explained, and held his hand up for her to help him up. “Sam Wilson.”

“Stephanie Rogers.” She pulled him up with one hand.

“I kind of put that together.” He huffed as he stood back on his feet, “Must’ve freaked you out coming home after the whole defrosting thing.”

“It takes some getting used to.” She smiled and nodded politely, turning to head back, “It’s good to meet you, Sam.”

“It’s your bed, right?” Sam called out, getting her attention back.

“What’s that?” She was kind of shocked to hear such an abrupt question.

“Your bed is too soft. When I was over there, I’d sleep on the ground and use rocks for pillows, like a caveman. Now I’m home, lying in my bed and it’s like…”
“…lying on a marshmallow, feel like I’m gonna sink right to the floor.” She nodded. Good to see someone else recognized that problem. She had many reasons to hate sleeping, but that was definitely one of them, “How long?”

“Two tours. You must miss the good ol’ days, huh?” He asked.

“Well, things aren’t so bad. Food’s a lot better, we used to boil everything. No polio’s good. Internet, so helpful.” She remembered all the stuff she lists when she counts her blessings, “Been reading that a lot, trying to catch up.”

Sam licked his lips as he took a moment to think, “Marvin Gaye. 1972. Trouble Man soundtrack. Everything you missed jammed into one album.”

She pulled out her little notebook and a pen, “I’ll put it on the list.” She added it right under Sex and City, which she only added after being asked so many times by journalists if she’s a Charlotte or a Samantha, whatever that meant.

Then, her phone buzzed with a text from Natasha, telling her to meet her on the curb for a mission.

“Alright, Sam, duty calls.” She smiled at him again and reached for a handshake, “Thanks for the run, if that’s what you wanna call running.”

Sam’s face was priceless, “Oh that’s how it is?”

“Oh, that’s how it is.” She smiled, he was so fun to tease.

“Anytime you want to stop by the VA, make the girl at the front desk jealous, just let me know.” He gave a sly smile.

“I’ll keep it in mind.” She felt a good rush in her stomach as she walked towards the car pulling up to them.

“Hey, fellas. Anyone of you know where the Smithsonian is? I’m here to pick up a fossil.” Natasha called as soon as she rolled down the windshield.

“That’s hilarious.” Stephanie sarcastically responded through her smile.

Sam looked into the car and nodded his head, “How you doing?”

“Hey.” Natasha playfully smiled back.

“Can’t run everywhere.” Stephanie took one last look at her new friend.

“No, you can’t.” Sam kept smiling as he watched the car take off.
“Target is a mobile satellite launch platform on the Lumerian Star. They were sending up their last payload when pirates took ‘em 93 minutes ago.” Agent Brock Rumlow, leader of the STRIKE team, explained as he pulled up information on the screen.

“Any demands?” Stephanie asked, keeping her eyes focused on the monitor.

“Billion and a half.”

“Why so steep?”

“Because it’s S.H.I.E.L.D’s.” Rumlow added.

Stephanie sighed in disappointment, “So it’s not off-course. It’s trespassing.”

“I’m sure they have a good reason.” Natasha could hear the judgement in the Captain’s voice already.

“You know, I’m getting a little tired of being Fury’s janitor.” Stephanie groaned.

“Relax, it’s not that complicated.” Natasha said nonchalantly.

Stephanie decided to push on with the task at hand, “How many pirates?”

“25. Top mercs, led by this guy,” Rumlow tapped on the stats on the screen, “George Batroc, Ex-DGSE, Action Division. He’s at the top of Interpol’s Red Notice. Before the French demobilized him, he had 36 kill missions. This guy’s got a rep for maximum casualties.”

“Hostages?” She asked.

“Hm, mostly techs. One officer, Jasper Sitwell. They’re in the galley.”

“What’s Sitwell doing on a launch ship?” Stephanie muttered to herself before continuing, “Alright, I’m gonna sweep the deck and find Batroc. Nat, you kill the engine and wait for instructions. Rumlow, you sweep aft, find the hostages, get them to the life-pods, get them out.”

As she called out the mission plan, she noticed Rumlow giving her that look that he always did when she was giving everyone else orders, and it was really starting to get on her nerves, “Let’s move.”

“STRIKE, you heard the Cap, gear up.” Rumlow said, still keeping that leering gaze in his eyes.

“Secure channel seven.” Stephanie ordered as she prepared for the drop.

“Seven secured. You do anything fun Saturday night?” Natasha asked.

“Well, all the ladies from my book club are dead…” Stephanie jested, but looked away awkwardly when Rumlow started prepping right next to them, looking like he was waiting to butt into the conversation.

That past Saturday had actually been really rough for her. She made the mistake of going through the reprinted anthology of her comic books that Clint had given her for her birthday, hoping to get some laughs out how cheesy they made her act, but then she hit a page where Captain America reunites a kidnapped scientist with his family. As the wife and children hug the father, Captain America leaves
them in peace with a smile as he thanks her for saving the day. Rather than ending right there, the last few panels show her at home, in her bed, writing a letter to her dear Sgt. Sweetheart, shedding a tear as she says she can’t wait to hold him the same way the scientist’s wife held her own husband.

“After all…” the character declares in big red bubbly letters, “True Love Finds a Way.”

Stephanie shut the book and stuffed it back into the bookshelf. Well, then she was bored and lonely. She wanted to call Natasha, but she’d already bugged her enough last weekend. She didn’t have the patience at that hour to deal with Tony, Bruce never returned her calls, Clint was on a mission, so she had no other choice. She called Brock. After all, she felt like she knew him well enough over several months. They worked well together on missions. He was decent enough, charming enough. A little married to the job, but she kind of liked that.

She held the phone in her hand, deciding on how to text him first. Should she ask if he was busy? Would he assume it was work-related? The thing was, she really did not want him to say no. She didn’t care what she had to do to make him stay, as long as she wasn’t alone.

So she texted two simple words, “Come over.”

“…So no, not really.” Stephanie answered Natasha, knowing that Brock heard her, but avoiding his face and trying to keep herself focused on the mission now.

“Coming up on the drop zone, Cap.” Her communicated interrupted just when she needed it, alerting her to press the buttons to open the plane.

“You know if you asked out Kristen from Statistics, she’d probably say yes.” Natasha suggested.

“That’s why I don’t ask.” Stephanie responded dryly as she tucked her braided hair into her helmet. When she told Natasha that she liked women, she wasn’t sure if she made it clear that was as well as men, since Natasha hadn’t suggested any for her so far. She had to prompt Rumlow on her own. Perhaps Natasha took it as some “No man will ever replace my husband, so I’ve sworn off men” kind of idea and now only gave her women’s names, but now was not the time to clear that up.

“Too shy or too scared?” Natasha asked.

Stephanie knew Natasha had good intentions, so she wasn’t really offended. She just responded, “Too busy” and then jumped off.

“Was she wearing a parachute?” Rumlow’s number two, Agent Rollins, asked.

Rumlow, who had been smiling knowingly the whole time, shook his head and chuckled a bit, “No. No, she wasn’t.”

She spread her arms out with her shield behind her catching the wind as she flew down towards the ship. Once she was close enough to reach the boat but far enough to alert them with a loud splash, she straightened herself out and dove into the ocean like a torpedo. She climbed up the anchor chain to bring herself on deck, putting the first guy she saw in a sleeper hold before he could make a sound.

Quickly and quietly tiptoeing around the ship, she threw her shield at any head she saw, knocking them out before they could notice her. When she ran into three guys at once, she kicked the first one so hard he fell off the boat, and then took turns with the other two until they were both down. Hopefully, she could take down the whole deck before the rest of STRIKE even landed. She ran around the perimeter, pushing off anyone who was close to the edge, throwing her shield from a distance, and charging forward with punches at anyone at close range. One guy tried to come at her
with a knife, but she grabbed it and kicked him to the wall. When he tried to reach for the alarm, she threw it, pinning his hand to the wall and making him cry out in pain. That looked like it really hurt, but he’d live.

When she got to the top of the ship, she confronted a fairly large group, who all noticed her before she could take one out, so she had to use her shield’s blunt force to knock out most of them and boomerang it to catch the guys around her. She flipped the smaller guys with her arms alone, but the big guy needed the full force. She jumped into his arms with her arm around his neck to send him spinning to the ground.

One guy managed to grab his weapon in time and shouted in French for her to stay where she was. However, before she turned around, she heard him grunt and fall to the ground, and saw Rumlow drop in right behind her, armed and ready to go.

“Thanks.” She smiled gratefully, as she always did when a team member proved they had her back. For the first direct eye contact she’d made with him for the whole mission, it wasn’t as awkward as she feared.

“Yeah, you seemed pretty helpless without me.” Rumlow carried his sarcasm with that smile that always pierced right through her. Looks like Rumlow wanted more than just one Saturday.

When Natasha landed, they moved on to deal with the rest of the pirates within the ship.

“What about the nurse who lives across the hall from you? She seems kind of nice.” Natasha asked as she shed her parachute off her shoulders.

“Secure the engine room, then find me a date.” Stephanie ordered.

“I’m multi-tasking.” Natasha said as she dropped over the rails.

When STRIKE took care of surrounding the pirates holding the hostages, Stephanie set off to find Batroc. She’d been on this kind of ship before, so she knew where the command center was usually located. It took a lot of climbing, but she managed to sneak up to it and plant a small wire tap on the window. Then, she found her hiding spot and waited for everyone else.

“STRIKE in position.” Rumlow informed her through their communicators.

“Natasha, what’s your status?” Stephanie whispered, but there was no answer, “Status, Natasha.”

“Hold on!” She heard a frustrated groan and a bunch of kicking and grunting on the other line, until Natasha finally exhaled, “Engine room secure.”

“On my mark,” She said, “3…2…1.”

From her perspective, she waited for STRIKE to do their job and take out the pirates, which she knew went well when they alerted Batroc, and as soon as he was off guard, she ran in and tossed her shield through his window. He ducked just in time, unfortunately, but she knew he wasn’t going to be easy to take out. As soon as she leaped through the window, he was on the ground waiting for her, and kicked her backwards so that he could make a run for it. She grabbed her shield out of the wall where it stuck and chased after him.

To make matters worse, Rumlow called in, “Romanoff missed the rendezvous point, Cap. Hostiles are still in play.”

“Natasha,” Stephanie panted into her mic, “Batroc’s on the move. Circle back to Rumlow and
protect the hostages.” She waited a little longer, where the hell did she go? “Natasha!”

Stephanie turned just in time to block the foot flying her way with her shield, but the kick was still strong enough to knock her backwards, making her tumble backwards. She rolled as Batroc kept trying to kick her as soon as she stood. When his leg came crashing between hers, she tried to stand up before he did, but his leg swept across and landed on her cheek. Well at least she knew what his specialty was. If she could block the flying kicks enough, maybe she could knock him off balance. When he eventually missed and landed on his back, he jumped right back up and charged, but now she could try to swing his legs away. When he got close enough, she landed a few knee kicks in his abdomen, but he flipped away until they were on opposite sides of the floor.

“<thought you were more than just a shield and a beautiful face.>” Batroc taunted her in French, with that god-forsaken smile that she had seem too many times today. Now, she was just pissed off.

She put her shield on her back, unbuckled her helmet and threw it off, swinging her head back to throw her messy braid behind her, “<Let’s see.>”

This time she caught every punch he threw at her, which wasn’t hard since it seemed kicks were all he was good for. She punched him in the face to stun him and throw him back far enough to where she could run and spin kick him to the ground. She thought that would keep him down, but when he got to his feet, she charged at him and knocked him through the door into the other room and knocked him out in a swift punch to the face.

“Well, this is awkward.” Natasha said, silently greeting Stephanie as she tapped away on the computers.

“What are you doing?” Stephanie asked, upset that she disobeyed orders.

“Back up the hard drive, it’s a good habit to get into.” Natasha joked as if it was not a big deal.

“Rumlow needed your help! What the hell are you doing here?” Stephanie scolded her sternly, but Natasha didn’t answer, just continued with whatever she was doing.


“What ever I can get my hands on.”

“Our mission is to rescue hostages!” Stephanie raised her voice.

“No, that’s your mission,” Natasha purred, pulling a flash drive out of the port, “and you’ve done it beautifully.”

Stephanie grabbed her arm as she tried to walk past her, “You just jeopardized this whole mission.”

“I think that’s overstating things.” Natasha was getting snippy, but right after she said that, Batroc leaped up and threw a grenade towards them before dashing out. Stephanie grabbed Natasha and jumped over the computers towards the office right next to them. Natasha shot at the window, making it easier for them to break through the glass plane to safety right as it went off. Their landing was not so comfortable, but neither one of them was injured.

“Okay,” Natasha huffed as they both tried to catch their breath against the wall, “That one’s on me.”

Stephanie threw herself up, sighing in frustration. For a mission that was technically successful, she wasn’t pleased at all.
“You’re damn right,” She groaned through gritted teeth as she stormed away.
“You just can’t stop yourself from lying, can you?” Stephanie stormed into Fury’s office at the Triskelion the first chance she could, and she knew that he knew she would be infuriated.

“I didn’t lie. Agent Romanoff had a different mission than yours.” Fury sounded guiltless as usual, and didn’t even turn around for her.

“Which you didn’t feel obliged to share.” Stephanie scolded, feeling belittled, like he didn’t trust her with such information.

“I’m not obliged to do anything.” Director Fury tried to remind her who was in charge here.

“Those hostages could have died, Nick.” She spoke solemnly.

“I sent the greatest soldier in history to make sure that didn’t happen.” Fury finally spun his chair around to face her.

Flattery wasn’t going to get him anywhere today, “Soldiers trust each other, that’s what makes it an army, not a bunch of guys running around shooting guns.”

“Last time I trusted someone, I lost an eye.” Fury stood up, getting fed up himself with Stephanie’s attitude as well, but he tried to satisfy her with somewhat of an explanation, “Look, I didn’t want you doing anything you weren’t comfortable with. Agent Romanoff is comfortable with everything.”

“I can’t lead a mission when the people I’m leading have missions of their own.” She pressed her finger against the desk. That was the most frustrating part of all this. What’s she supposed to do when one of her soldiers goes silent? Assume they’re doing something more important? How is she supposed to know when to worry? How can she count on them when they won’t even answer their damn communicator because Fury’s occupying them with another mission?

“It’s called compartmentalization. No one spills the secrets because no one knows them all.” Fury tried to explain, while trying to keep this from becoming a shouting match.

“Except you.” Stephanie put her hands on her hips.

Director Fury sighed and stood up straight, “You’re wrong about me. I do share. I’m nice like that.”

He led her towards the elevator to show her something, overriding the restriction from her being a Level 8 member of S.H.I.E.L.D.

“You know, they used to play music.” Stephanie commented after a few seconds of awkward silence.

“Yeah,” Fury chuckled, “My grandfather operated one of these things for forty years. Y’know, Granddad worked in a nice building, got good tips. He’d walk home every night, a roll of ones stuffed in his lunch bag. He’d say ‘Hi.’ People said ‘Hi’ back. Time went on, neighborhood got rougher. He’d say ‘Hi.’ They’d say ‘Keep on stepping.’ Granddad got to gripping that lunchbag a little tighter.”

“Did he ever get mugged?” Stephanie asked.

Fury laughed, “Every week some punk would say ‘What’s in the bag?’”
“What’d he do?”

“He’d show ‘em. A bunch of crumpled ones, and a loaded .22 Magnum.” Fury approached the window as they arrived at the construction underneath the base, “Granddad loved people, but he didn’t trust them very much.”

Stephanie’s forehead wrinkled as she stared out at the helicarriers that were noticeably bigger than the one she first got a tour of when she was unfrozen two years ago. The canons along the sides looked like the legs on a centipede. These huge goliaths looked like they had taken years to complete, and they were almost finished from as far as she could tell.

“Yeah, I know. They’re a little bigger than a .22.” Fury was amused by Stephanie’s fallen jaw, “This is Project Insight. Three next-generation helicarriers synced to a network of targeting satellites.”

“Launched from the Lemurian Star.” Stephanie added, finally understanding why that mission seemed so important, even though no one wanted to tell her what it was for.

“Once we get them in the air, they never need to come down. Continuous sub-orbital flight, courtesy of our new repulsor engines.” Fury explained.

“Stark?” Stephanie asked since this seemed up his alley.

“He had a few suggestions once he got an up close look at our old turbines.” Fury responded.

So who else knew about Project Insight before her? Apparently Tony and Natasha were already in on it, but what about Rumlow and his STRIKE team? What about Bruce, since he worked with Tony? Did everyone just refuse to tell her because they knew she wouldn’t like it? Or was it never considered her business because they saw her as a mascot who needed missions every now and then to keep her satisfied?

“These new long-range precision guns can eliminate 1,000 hostiles a minute. The satellites can read a terrorist’s DNA before he steps outside his spider hole. We’re going to neutralize a lot of threats before they even happen.” Fury boasted, expecting her to be impressed.

“I thought the punishment usually came after the crime.” Stephanie gripped her sides tightly. She couldn’t just stand aside anymore and let Fury do as he wanted, not when it was raising hundreds of red flags in her head. She didn’t care if he was the Director, if this organization was founded in her honor, then the least they should do is listen her every now and then.

“We can’t afford to wait that long.” Fury spoke seriously, with the decades of wars behind his eyes that she never had to experience.

“Who’s ‘we’?” She asked, figuring that if everyone in America knew they would be under this kind of surveillance, they would not let it stand.

“After New York, I convinced the World Security Council that we needed a quantum surge in threat analysis. For once we’re way ahead of the curve.” Fury looked away from her.

“By holding a gun to everyone on Earth and calling it protection.” She sighed and spoke dryly, with mixed feelings of relief at knowing the truth just in time, but disappointment as well.

“You know I read those SSR files. Greatest Generation? You guys did some nasty stuff.” Fury turned back at her with that accusatory look in his eye.

“Yeah, we compromised, sometimes in ways that made us not sleep so well, but we did it so that
people could be free.” Stephanie had made more than her fair share of tough calls, and she carried those burdens every day, but she wasn’t going to carry this one. “This isn’t freedom. This is fear.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D takes the world as it is, not as we’d like it be, and it’s getting damn near past time for you to get with that program, Cap.” Fury was on the brink of scolding her, and she could tell that he wasn’t going to budge on this. Well, neither was she, so there was nothing really left for her to do here.

“Don’t hold your breath.” She snarled as she clutched her belt, her mid-back length hair swishing behind her as she showed herself out.
She rode her motorcycle to the Smithsonian, where a new exhibit on her had just opened up. She knew it was going to hurt, but there was still something beautiful every time she faced old memories, even if it left her in tears.

They put her near the planes and space crafts, like the Spirit of St. Louis and Sputnik. The exhibit opened up with the American flag, of course, as well as some quotes about her being the ideal soldier and woman. The actual title for the display was “Captain America: The Living Legend and Symbol of Courage.” She lowered her baseball cap and kept her hands tucked in her jacket as she walked past the mural of her in her first action uniform. She still remembered Howard bragging about how it was 99% tear proof. Well, he would be proud to know that it last all those years in the ice with her and the techs said they had a difficult time changing her out of it while she was unconscious.

“A symbol to the nation, a hero to the world. The story of Captain America is one of honor, bravery, and sacrifice.”

That was a nice touch to get the actor who played Lt. Dan in Forrest Gump to narrate, especially since she read that he did USO tours himself, just like she used to do, but probably without the skirt and heeled boots. They had a small part near the entrance with her stats before and after the serum, like her height and weight, complete with a little picture from her training at Camp Lehigh as well as one of her in the clothes Peggy gave her right after she emerged from the Vita-Ray machine. There was even a screen that superimposed the big her on top of skinny her, and the children all gathered around to compare their heights to her.

“Denied enlistment into the Women’s Army Corps due to poor health, Stephanie Barnes was chosen for a program unique in the annals of American warfare, one that would transform her into the world’s first Super Soldier.”

It warmed her heart to see all the little girls in miniature versions of her fighting suit and her showgirl outfit, and reminded her why she took the USO job in the first place. If she had said no and gone to Alamogordo like Col. Phillips planned, all of these little girls would have one less hero to look up to. She saw one girl, about eight years old, staring at her, obviously recognizing her. Stephanie smiled and put one finger to her lips to tell her that this would be their little secret, and the girl nodded, still wide-eyed in amazement.

“Battle tested, Captain America and her Howling Commandoes quickly earned their stripes. Their mission: taking down Hydra, a Nazi rogue science division.”

Another good thing about the museum is that now she knew where half her stuff went. While she’d be gone, it’d been passed from collector to collector until it was eventually donated here. They had her old motorbike, some of her old weapons, even all the Commando’s uniforms, or at least replicas of them. They even had mannequins donning her assortment of USO outfits, with some being city-specific or the ones she wore on TV.

When she turned around, she saw the piece she was both waiting and dreading to see, Bucky’s memorial panel, titled “SGT. SWEETHEART” in bold letters. The main picture had him in his blue coat, but in between the lines of biography text were pictures from their wedding and when they were on missions together.

“Sweethearts since childhood, Bucky Barnes and Stephanie Rogers were inseparable on playground and battlefield. On April 24th of 1938, Stephanie Barnes and Bucky Barnes said their ‘I do’s’ in a
private ceremony at St. Augustine’s Catholic Church in Brooklyn, New York. Captain America fought side by side with her beloved husband until he gave his life in service of this country, the only Howling Commando to do so.”

It sounded more poetic than it felt. The screens surrounding her played an assortment of wartime footage of her and Bucky charging together towards an enemy camp. They also had clips of them laughing together at the mess hall with her muffling herself in his chest while he wrapped his arms around her, or when they kissed in Howard’s office. Even if they had captured every single kiss and touch and laugh and smile and whisper and joke and hug and tear and snicker and eye roll and pout and smirk and nudge and breath that they shared and put it all out there for the world to see, no one would understand how much she loved him.

“That was a difficult winter.”

She heard Peggy’s soothing voice boom through the speakers, and turned to see the footage of her on the large screen subtitled with her name and the year 1953. She was still gorgeous as ever with short black hair.

“A blizzard had trapped half our battalion behind the German line. When Steph- Captain Barnes learned that her husband was with them, she didn’t hesitate for a moment. She fought her way through a Hydra blockage that had pinned our allies down for months, single-handedly. She saved over a thousand men, including her husband…and the man would eventually become mine, as it turned out. Even after she died, Stephanie was still changing my life.”

“You should be proud of yourself, Peggy.” Stephanie told her old friend as she looked at the photos on her bedside table displaying her children.

“Mm, I have lived a life,” Peggy spoke softly, keeping her weakened bones covered in her warm bed, “My only regret is that you didn’t get to live yours.”

Stephanie lowered her gaze, and took Peggy’s hands in her own, as they always did to comfort each other. She was still as gorgeous as ever with silvery hair.

“What is it?” Peggy asked, in her grandmotherly caring voice.

“For as long as I can remember, I just wanted to do what was right. I guess I’m not quite sure what that is anymore.” Stephanie felt guilty unloading her burdens on an old lady, but Peggy had lived through all these years that she hadn’t. She had always been mature, but now she was wise, “And I thought I could throw myself back in and follow orders, serve…but it’s just not the same.”

Peggy chuckled, “You’re always so dramatic. Look, you saved the world.” Peggy told her, as seeing Stephanie made her reminisce as well, back to their war, and the many wars that followed after, where Peggy had to get her own hands dirty, “We rather…mucked it up.”

“You didn’t.” Stephanie insisted, “Knowing you founded S.H.I.E.L.D is half the reason I stay.”

Peggy sighed, remembering all the people she failed to save, all the secrets she failed to keep, all the people she trusted who would later betray her, all the times she was forced to make hard calls that she would later regret. She tightened her grasp on Stephanie’s hand and pulled it closer to her, “The world has changed, and none of us can go back. All we can do is our best, and sometimes the best that we can do is start over.”
Peggy started coughing and tried to clear her throat to keep talking, but it was too rough. Stephanie quickly retrieved her glass of water and offered it to her, but when she looked back into Peggy’s eyes, she swallowed a painful lump as she watched her friend’s mind reset.

“S-Stephanie…” Peggy groaned.

“Yeah?” She whispered.

“Y-You’re alive…” Peggy’s eyes watered, “You…You came back.”

“Yeah, Peggy.” Stephanie smiled sadly.

Peggy was about to burst into tears, “It’s been so long….so long.”

“Well I couldn’t leave my best girl,” Stephanie pet her cheek lovingly, “Not when she owes me a dance.”
“The thing is…I think it’s getting worse,” A woman bravely told her story through a shaky voice, “A cop pulled me over last week; he thought I was drunk. I swerved to miss a plastic bag…I thought it was an IED.”

Stephanie quietly leaned in the doorway, deciding not to enter because she felt like she would be intruding. The last thing she wanted was to draw attention. She was lucky enough to not get recognized amongst civilians, but veterans might know better.

“Some stuff you leave there, other stuff you bring back. It’s our job to figure out how to carry it. Is it going to be in a big suitcase or in a little man purse? It’s up to you.” Sam told the support group. Stephanie took a moment to think about that herself. It differed, depending on the day. It was never smaller than a high school student’s backpack, but on the days where it was like hundred pound weights strapped to her neck and back were the days when she didn’t even have it in her to call for help. She cancelled all her appointments on those days, because if anyone saw her on those days, they’d never think of Captain America the same way again.

“Look who it is, the Running Girl.” Sam smiled as he caught her wandering in the hallways, trying to look occupied.

“Caught the last few minutes, that’s pretty intense.” Stephanie folded her arms and leaned against the wall near his table of pamphlets.

“Yeah, mama, we all got the same problems. Guilt, regret…” Sam stared out for a moment in a way that Stephanie knew all too well.

“You lose someone?” She asked.

Sam nodded with his head down, saying quietly, “My wingman, Riley. Flying a night mission, standard PJ rescue op, nothing we hadn’t done a thousand times before, ‘til an RPG knocked Riley’s dumb ass out of the sky. Nothing I could do; it’s like I was up there just to watch.”

“I’m sorry.” She told him the only thing she remembered making her feel better when Bucky fell, besides every word that Peggy said.

“After that, I had a really hard time finding a reason for being over there, y’know?” Sam gestured to her.

Stephanie slightly nodded. When Bucky died, all her focus went to stopping Hydra, and she thought she had died doing that. When she woke up, she saw that the world had enough problems to need her to stay Captain America, but no matter what, she still didn’t get the same fulfillment she did during World War II, “But you’re happy now? Back in the world?”

“Hey, the number of people giving me orders is down to about zero, so hell yeah.” Sam gave a satisfied nod, “You thinking about getting out?”

Stephanie hesitantly shook her head, “No…I don’t know…to be honest, I wouldn’t know what to do with myself if I did.” She did know that if she had absolutely nothing to occupy her time, things would get ugly really quickly.

Sam shrugged, “Ultimate fighting?”
Stephanie laughed, “Well, you’re the first one to not say modeling.”

“Oh yeah, mama, you could do that too if you wanted!” Sam laughed harder for a moment before composing himself, “But seriously, you could do whatever you want to do. What makes you happy?”

*Family, but that’s not something I can resign and go home to tomorrow,* she thought to herself, but out loud she just said, “I don’t know.”

“You know what makes me happy? A nice Reuben from that deli about three blocks away. The meat’s always tender but never too greasy.” Sam smiled at her in that way she liked from him.

“Sounds delicious,” She tucked her hair behind her ear, “I ought to try it sometime.”

“How about tonight?” He rubbed his lip, like it had taken a lot of nerve to say that.

She raised her eyebrows and gave a pleasant little laugh, “A date?”

“With you?” Sam chuckled, “I’d love to.”

She laughed harder, realizing she may have walked into that one, but it was a cute move, nevertheless.

“I’m sorry, it was worth a shot.” He folded his arms and rubbed his nose.

“Yes it was,” She smiled and tucked her hands into her jacket pockets, “So what time?”

Sam’s eyes widened when he realized it actually worked, “Seriously?”

“Yeah, why not?” She shrugged. He was a good-looking and friendly person, and she was looking for that.

“Well, uh,” He stammered for a moment, clutching the papers in his hand, “My shift’s already over, so I just gotta take these back to the office.”

“Great, we can go right after.”
When Stephanie got back to her apartment that night, she was on that long forgotten cloud of satisfaction. The date with Sam went pretty well, for a man she’d only met once before. She thought he was going to ask her about being Captain America and what the 40’s were like, but he was too busy making her laugh the whole time. She had really needed an evening like that for a while, with good food, and someone who made feel right at home. How did he manage to show up right when she needed him?

As she got up the stairs, she saw her neighbor Kate juggling her phone and her laundry basket. She nodded and said Hi politely, leaving her to her business until Kate hung up and started talking to her.

“My aunt, she’s kind of an insomniac.” Kate chuckled and threw her phone into her laundry bin.

Stephanie smiled and nodded, feeling unusually social after her date, “Hey, y’know, if you want…If you want, you’re welcome to use my machine, might be cheaper than the one in the basement.”

“Oh yeah?” Kate looked interested, “What’s it cost?”

Stephanie shrugged, and figured she’d try to get new friends into the mix as well, “Cup of coffee?”

“Thank you, but, um…” Kate bit her lip, “I already have a load in downstairs, and I really don’t want my scrubs in your machine. I just finished a rotation in the infectious disease ward, so…”

“Ah, well,” Stephanie giggled, as if she could actually get sick, “I’ll keep my distance.”

“Hopefully not too far.” Kate smiled back at her.

As Stephanie headed for her door, Kate also added, “Oh, and I think you left your stereo on.”

“Oh, T-thank you.” Stephanie politely let her on her way, but quickly turned to her door in concern. She was almost positive the apartment was dead silent when she left, but she could hear one of her old records playing inside. Someone must’ve broken in, but who and why? If someone was waiting for her inside, going straight through the front door would be walking into the trap. She went to the roof and climbed her way down and through the window instead.

Keeping her shield close to her body, she tiptoed lightly across the walls, hiding behind every corner and shelf as she made her way to the source of the noise. She slowly peeked from the hall to the small den where she kept her records, and as she looked closer, she found Nick Fury, slumped in her armchair in the dark.

She deeply exhaled even though she only felt slightly less danger, “I don’t remember giving you a key.”

Fury leaned up with a very painful grunt, showing his arm in a sling, “You really think I’d need one? My wife…kicked me out.”

Probably told her one too many lies, is what Stephanie wanted to say, but this looked very serious, so she just said, while still tucked behind the corner, “I didn’t know you were married.”

Fury shrugged his good shoulder, “A lot of things you don’t know about me.”

“I know, Nick.” She turned on the lights, “That’s the problem.”
However, Nick silently shushed her and turned the lights back off. This must’ve been more serious
that she thought. When he showed her a message on his phone that said “Ears everywhere” she got
the sinking threatening feeling in her stomach.

“I’m sorry to have to do this but I had no place else to crash.” Fury’s way of telling her that she was
the only one he trusted right now. Whether he meant it or not, she still couldn’t tell, until he showed
her another message that said “SHIELD’s compromised.”

“Who else knows about your wife?” She tried to sound sympathetic and not scared, for the cameras,
or the wire taps or whatever.

“Just…my friends,” Fury stood with a struggle, with his real answer on the phone, “You and Me.”

“Is that what we are?” She asked, and she didn’t need to pull out her phone and type it out for him to
understand that she was really asking him to cut all the bullshit and tell him if she was really the only
one he came to.

“That’s up to you.” He said. So even if she wasn’t the only person he trusted right now, she was
definitely the first.

She knew the threat was real when bullets burst through her wall and hit Fury in the back. She
quickly pulled him away, looking at giant holes in the wall hoping to catch a glimpse of the shooter.
Fury gasped for air, and clutched tightly onto her arm, but she didn’t know what she could do for
him. He told her SHIELD was compromised, so no call was safe. As his arm slid down hers, she felt
him drop a small hunk of metal in her hand, a flash drive, the same one that Natasha got from the
Lumerian Star.

“Don’t…trust…anyone.” Fury groaned in a desperate plea, looking deep into her eyes.

Suddenly, she heard furious knocking and a kicked down door from the front.

“Captain Rogers?!” She heard the female voice, and looked through her shelf to see it was Kate,
armed with an assault rifle and alert. When she found her she informed her, “Captain, I’m Agent 13
of S.H.I.E.L.D’s Special Service.”

“Kate?” Stephanie asked in shock.

“I’m assigned to protect you.” Agent 13 told her, rushing over to the scene in her civilian pajamas.

“On whose order?” Stephanie barked.

“…His.” Agent 13 dropped her weapon when she saw Fury on the ground. She rushed over to
check his vitals and then pulled a walkie talkie out from her draw-string pants, “Foxtrot is down.
He’s unresponsive, I need EMTs.”

“Do we have a 20 on the shooter?” The other voice sounded almost robot through the static.

Stephanie looked out the window and saw a dark figure with a shining arm fleeing the scene. That
must’ve been the bastard who murdered Fury right on her own living room floor.

“She told ‘em I’m in pursuit.” She told the agent before jumping through the window, hot on the
assassin’s trail. She was as furious in her chase as she was when Dr. Erskine was murdered. If this
asshole tried to pull the cyanide escape when she caught him, she was going to throw her fist down
his throat and force him to painfully choke on that instead.
Her jump landed her in the next building and she barged her way through all the offices while watching the killer run across the clear ceiling. She caught a glance of him just at the end of the hallway, jumping to the lower part of the roof. She shattered one last window and threw the shield at him from behind, hoping to knock him ungracefully off the roof to a crushing fall on the pavement.

Instead, the killer stopped just before the edge, turned around and caught her shield with his metallic arm with a red star. Now that she got a closer look at it, it wasn’t just plated armor, but a cybernetic enhancement with that buzzed like a machine as the fingers squeezed around the edge of her shield. He gave her one quick aggressive stare with war-painted eyes, and a mask that hid what she imagined to be an evil smile. His long and dirty brown hair swished out of his face as he threw the shield back at her. She caught it right as it hit her stomach and sent her sliding back a few feet, but that gave him the time he needed to jump off and escape.

When she ran to the edge, she looked out to the streets and trees, but she couldn’t find anything. Not even a quick shine from that metal arm. He’d escaped for now, but she got a good enough look at him to distinguish him in a crowd. He would need more than just a new arm when she got him, and it wouldn’t be even half of what he deserved for murdering the man who had done nothing but trust her since she woke up in the 21st century.
The Wake

Stephanie followed the ambulance on her own and called Natasha on the way. She tried to gauge her reaction over the phone, but Natasha’s silence could have meant anything. Fury was immediately taken into surgery, and Steph teared up as she felt helpless and alone behind the glass. When Natasha ran in, the shallowness of her breath told Steph that she was genuinely shocked and not just pretending. Fury told her not to trust anyone, but she knew that Natasha respected him, and not just because he was the one to give her a second chance. She knew there was no way she would have just let this happen to him.

“Is he gonna make it?” Natasha asked.

“I don’t know.” Stephanie mumbled, wiping under her eyes.

“Tell me about the shooter.”

“He’s fast, strong… had a metal arm.” Stephanie could vividly remember the details about the disgusting monster, but stuck to the ones that distinguished him the most. The metal arm was obviously noticeable, but catching her shield was not something a lot of people could do, and neither was outrunning her. Anyone could wear a mask, though, and she was sure that what was under the mask would be nothing special either.

Soon, Agent Hill joined them, looking concerned, but calm.

“Ballistics?” Natasha asked her.

“Three slugs. No rifling, completely untraceable.” Hill shook her head.

“Soviet made.” Natasha whispered, like she was having a flashback.

“Yeah.” Hill sounded a little surprised that she guessed that, but then the blaring of the heart monitor took all of their attention back to Fury, who they were slowly losing.

“Don’t do this to me, Nick.” Natasha was audibly about to cry, and Stephanie wanted to provide a comforting arm, but she didn’t know if she should. When he flatlined, she said it again, and again, chanting it under her breath.

Stephanie had already accepted that he was gone, and gave Natasha her space. Of course Nick Fury had to die; it was just the natural consequence of her trusting him. So many people were dead because they put their faith in her: Dr. Erskine, Bucky, and now Director Fury. I guess that’s why they called her an Avenger, and why she had to constantly prove herself worthy of their sacrifices.

She clutched the hard drive in her jacket pocket. He gave this to her, and now she couldn’t let anyone else get their hands on it, not even Natasha or Agent Hill. She knew that whoever wanted this would come after her next, so she didn’t have a lot of time. Until she found a proper hiding place, the zip pocket in her purse would have to do.

Stephanie rejoined Natasha as she was looking over Fury’s body. She didn’t know if she could handle watching the infamous Black Widow cry real tears. Clearly this affected her more Stephanie expected, and then she realized. Natasha didn’t just respect Nick Fury, she cared about him, maybe even loved him as a daughter loves her father.

“I need to take him.” Agent Hill told Stephanie, cueing her to remind Natasha to say her last
goodbyes.

“Natasha.” Stephanie quietly stepped behind her and touched her shoulder. For two years, this woman helped bring her back into the world after losing everything, and now she didn’t know what she could do to return the favor.

Natasha touched his forehead one last time before dashing out of the room.

Stephanie chased after her, “Natasha!”

Natasha turned back with an almost furious tone in her voice, “Why was Fury in your apartment?”

It hurt not to tell her, but Natasha was the one who gave the drive to Fury in the first place. There must have been a reason why he didn’t give it back to her. So Stephanie shook her head, “I don’t know.”

“Cap,” Rumlow called from behind her. She didn’t even realize until then that he was even there, “They want you back at S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“Yeah, give me a second.” Stephanie murmured.

“They want you now.” Rumlow insisted.

Stephanie gave him that look that she didn’t like his tone. She didn’t know if he thought that their one night made him her new boyfriend or if he was just being bossy, but it got on her nerves, so she snapped “Okay.”

Now Natasha was slyly smiling at her, “You’re a terrible liar.”

Crap. She had to know about the drive, or maybe she was just lucky and Natasha was only talking about Rumlow, but that was a stretch. She had to ditch it now, but be able to come back for it later. Once Natasha left, she saw STRIKE talking amongst themselves and not looking at her. She could have excused herself to use the restroom where she could hide it behind a toilet or something, but then she figured that the custodians cover every inch during maintenance and would throw it away.

When she turned around, she saw that the vending machine was open for restocking. Hm, anyone preoccupied with stealing S.H.I.E.L.D intel probably wouldn’t worry about a snack when searching the place. Also, it was within reach. She quickly pulled the drive out of her purse and snuck it way behind the gum before the vendor even noticed. When she walked alongside Rumlow back to headquarters, she didn’t look him in the eye.

Stephanie suited up for her meeting with Secretary Alexander Pierce that morning. She was running on little sleep, but she knew how to cope at this point. Keeping her hair in a twisted ponytail was the easiest way to look decent on a rough day. She arrived just as Agent 13 was leaving.

“Captain Rogers.” She greeted.

“Neighbor.” Stephanie blew right past her. If she had a bodyguard, they could have told her about it. Also, she didn’t even know her real name if it wasn’t Kate.

“Ah, Captain. I’m Alexander Pierce.” The bespectacled man raised his hand out for a handshake.

“Sir, it’s an honor.” She politely shook it, even though something about the man’s smile threw her
off. Maybe Fury’s final words were making her see threats when there were none, or maybe it was intuition.

“The honor’s mine, Captain. My father served in the 101st. Come on in.” He led her inside his large office which had a good view of the river and the Washington Monument. The fact that it was similar to Fury’s office didn’t feel like a coincidence considering Pierce was Fury’s replacement for the time being. Pierce tried to start some friendly chat with her before telling her why he called her here, but she just stood silently, feigning interested nods.

He finally caught her attention when he handed her a series of pictures of when Nick Fury was sworn in as Director, and it was strange to see Fury with two eyes for once.

“That photo was taken five years after Nick and I met, when I was in the State department in Bogota. ELN rebels took the embassy and security got me out, but the rebels took hostages. Nick was Deputy Chief of the S.H.I.E.L.D station there, and he comes to me with a plan. He wants to storm the building through the sewers, and I said no, we’ll negotiate. Turns out the ELN didn’t negotiate so they put out a kill order. They stormed the basement, and what do they find? They find it empty.” Pierce pulled out a bunch of files from his desk and took them over to her, motioning for her to sit on the couch if she liked. “Nick had ignored my direct order and carried out an unauthorized military operation on soil. He saved the lives of a dozen political officers, including my daughter.”

“So you gave him a promotion.” Stephanie concluded.

“I’ve never had any cause to regret.” Pierce responded.

Stephanie looked away. It looked like Nick Fury did had more friends than she realized. She remembered not just his final words but his story in the elevator. Just because he didn’t trust everyone didn’t mean he didn’t care about them. Still, the person behind his death must’ve been someone he trusted if they could compromise his entire organization. Even with all the walls he put up, someone still got through.

“Captain, why was Nick in your apartment last night?” Pierce finally asked.

Steph looked at him and had a split second to change her lying face since Natasha spotted the last one, “I don’t know.”

“Did you know it was bugged?”

She took a nervous breath, since she was still uncomfortable about that. She didn’t know how long it had been bugged, but it didn’t have to be long for whoever was watching her to see some intimate details that she didn’t want her superior officers to know, “I did, because Nick told me.”

“Did he tell you he was the one who bugged it?” Pierce looked at her and she wondered if he was judging her. She didn’t put it past Nick, rest his soul, but now she wondered what for. She didn’t exactly have a long list of contacts to betray him to when she took this job. Anyone who owed her a favor was probably dead. If it was for inappropriate relations with fellow S.H.I.E.L.D agents, he could have called her out on that months ago.

“I want you to see something.” Pierce changed the subject as he turned on his monitor to show Batroc in custody.

“Is that live?” She asked.

“Yeah, they picked him up in a not-so-safe house in Algiers.”
“Are you saying he’s a suspect? Assassination isn’t Batroc’s line.”

“No, it’s more complicated than that.” Pierce started flipping through the files on the coffee table, “Batroc was hired anonymously to attack the Lemurian Star, and he was contacted by e-mail and paid by wire transfer, and then the money was run through 17 fictitious accounts, the last one going to a holder company that was registered to a Jacob Veech.”

“Am I supposed to know who that is?” She shuffled through the file he handed her.

“Not likely, Veech died six years ago. His last address was 1435 Elmhurst Drive. When I first met Nick, his mother lived in 1437.”

Stephanie looked at him suspiciously, “Are you saying Fury hired the pirates? Why?”

“The prevailing theory…was that the hijacking was a cover for the acquisition and sale of classified intelligence. Sale went sour and that led to Nick’s death.” Pierce explained.

“If you really knew Nick Fury, you’d know that’s not true.” Stephanie found the idea almost laughable. Fury wouldn’t reveal his favorite color for a billion dollars. How could anyone think he’d sell that kind of intelligence?

Pierce smiled, “Why do you think we’re talking?”

He stood up and gazed out the window, “See, I took a seat on the council not because I wanted to, but because Nick asked me to, because we were both realists. We knew that, despite all the diplomacy and the handshaking and the rhetoric, that to build a really better world sometimes means having to tear the old one down…” He looked back at her with determination behind his eyes, “…and that makes enemies.”

“Those people that call you dirty because you got the guts to stick your hands in the mud and make something better,” Pierce looked directly at her, like he wanted her to nod, “and the thought those people could be happy today…makes me really really angry.”

She could feel his gaze accusing her as she kept her arms pinned to her sides.

“Captain, you were the last one to see Nick alive. I don’t think that an accident and I don’t think you do either. So I’m going to ask again, why was he there?”

Stephanie knew that no matter how many times she said I don’t know, that wouldn’t be an acceptable answer. The least she could do was ward him off with part of the truth, the part that he should expect from Nick Fury if this man was truly as close of a friend as he claimed to be.

“He told me not to trust anyone.” She answered calmly.

“I wonder…if that included him.”

“I’m sorry, those were his last words.” She was exhausted of all the second-guessing, and she knew there would only be more to come.

“Excuse me,” she lowered her head as she grabbed her shield and put it on her back to leave.

“Captain,” He called her back, “Someone murdered my friend and I’m going to find out why. Anyone gets in my way; they’re going to regret it.” He didn’t even veil the threat, “Anyone.”

At least that was one thing they could agree on. She gave one last small nod, “Understood.”
Stephanie hated how anxious she felt, so she tried to get her mind back on work.

“Operations Control.” She robotically requested the elevator which confirmed it back to her in the same tone.

As she faced the window, she heard the door almost shut and then open again, along with Rumlow’s voice, which sent a chill down her spine. She heard a couple other guys from S.T.R.I.K.E too, which was sort of a relief, since she didn’t want to be alone with him and face the awkward talk.

“Cap.” Rumlow nodded nonchalantly.

“Rumlow.” She didn’t meet his gaze, but she turned away from the window and crossed her hands politely over her lap.

“Evidence Response found some fibers on the roof they want us to see. You want me to get the Tac team ready?” Rumlow looked at her, asking her professionally.

“No, let’s wait and see what it is first.” Stephanie kept her eyes low.

“Right.” Rumlow nodded and looked away again.

When Steph looked around at everything but Rumlow, she could see the other guys also purposely avoiding her gaze as well. She knew what she was hiding, but what were they hiding? One guy even subconsciously touched his gun, something he would only do if he intended to pull it out soon. When the doors opened, a group of guys in suits chatting to each other entered and asked for the business level. They also refused to look her in the eye, except for one guy excusing his way through, and tried to look as busy as possible. The crowding forced her to move herself closer to Rumlow.

“Sorry about what happened with Fury, messed up what happened to him.” Rumlow said over his shoulder.

“Thank you,” She could hear the insincerity, which offended her more than if he had said nothing at all.

She looked back at the suspicious crowd around her and saw some of them sweating. Finally, the door opened once more and the rest of S.T.R.I.K.E joined Rumlow and blocked her way to the exit. Now she was certain that she could trust no one in this elevator. Her own team was cornering her, most likely to murder her. Well, being caught in a room full of bad guys had never stopped her before.

“Before we get started, does anyone want to get out?” She asked.
Suddenly, a stun baton ignited and Rollins swung at her, but she knocked his arm out of the way. Unfortunately, that made her open enough for everyone to grab her and hook around her limbs and neck. Someone slammed on the emergency stop button to trap her inside. Whichever way she pulled, they pulled back. She grunted painfully as felt the sharp sting of the baton pressed on her chest. One of the business guys pulled the magnetic handle off his briefcase and tried to cuff her to the door. She screamed as she pulled with all her strength to keep it from making contact.

She threw her wrist down and kicked the guy’s leg, sending him to his knees. She elbowed another guy in the face and knocked one of the cuffs towards the ceiling. With her limbs free, she could swing and kick anyone who came near her, and finally head-butted the guy holding her in a headlock.

Rumlow kicked her, which sent her cuffed wrist flying back where it attached to the wall. Shit, that was the last thing she needed. He charged at her with the stun baton, and she knocked his arm away once, but he came back with a mighty swing right in her back that knocked her chest into the wall. He pressed closer to her, with the baton against her back, zapping her spine. She didn’t want to cry out and show him her pain, but it throttled all her muscles. Furious, she threw her arm back to slap him away, which sent him into the wall, and knocked another guy into the glass. The next guy who came at her with one of those wretched things got his wrist thrown so that it accidentally shocked the other attacker, and then she knocked him out with one uppercut.

Finally, she jumped and planted her feet against the wall to pull her cuffed arm free. With her full mobility, she took out the last two business guys no problem.

“What, big girl.” Rumlow huffed as stood armed with two batons, “I just want you to know, hun. This isn’t personal.”

She could only grab one of his wrists, which left the other one free to strike her right in the crotch and zap her. The horrible buzzing covered her muffled screaming, and she could see the disgusting satisfaction on his face. She threw both fists, but he evaded them and caught her wrist this time and shocked her again in the stomach. If this was his idea of a second date, she was glad to find out sooner rather than later.

She slipped her wrist out of his grip and slammed his bony cheek, and then she grabbed him by the arms and threw him into the ceiling lights, finally knocking him out.

She looked down at him as she gasped for breath and felt the throbbing pain all over, “It kind of feels personal.”

She kicked her shield back into her hand and broke the magnetic cuff off. She turned off the emergency lock, but the door opened to reveal a whole SWAT team waiting for her. She sliced through the elevator cables with her shield, which sent her quickly accelerating downwards but the rails jammed before she could reach the ground floor. A quick check through the doors showed her that there was a team on every floor hunting her down.

“Damn it, Rogers! Get that door open! You’ve got nowhere to go!” They shouted from the other side.

Well that sounded like a challenge to her. She saw the main lobby only a few several floors below the glass window, and she didn’t have a choice here. She took one deep breath before throwing herself out the window and curling up into a ball on top of her shield. She broke through two layers of glass and one metal bar on the way down, and she didn’t even bounce when she hit the ground. She let a few groans out of her system as she picked herself up and made a run for it.
She couldn’t evade them on foot for long, so she strapped on her helmet and grabbed her motorcycle out of the garage and made it out just before the doors sealed shut. Up ahead, the gates closed and the spikes went up, so she had about 10 seconds to get her and her bike past them. Luckily, an aircraft showed up just in time.

“Stand down, Captain Rogers.” A mechanical voice echoed from the ship as machine guns appeared from underneath it. Well if they were bringing out the big guns, they must be on their last limb, “Stand down. Repeat. Stand down.”

Swerving kept her out of the line of fire until she could throw her shield into the exposed wing engine, making it drop low enough for her to bring her bike to a crashing halt and fling herself on top of it. She pulled her shield free and tumbled around the spinning ship until she could plant herself on top and hit both of the engines in one throw. With enough damage to take it out of the air, she launched herself into the street, sticking the landing.

She took one last scornful look at the building before fleeing.
The first thing she had to ditch was her suit. The VA was where she looked the least conspicuous, so no one batted an eye as she took the back entrance to the gym and powerwalked to the locker room. Luckily, it was empty, so she just had a break a lock with her shield and steal some unassuming woman’s track clothes and stuff her suit in the duffle bag.

“Sorry, ma’am. It’s for a good cause.” She said as she zipped up the blue hoodie.

Now that she looked like any random white blonde girl, she could rush to get that drive out of the hospital vending machine. However, by the time she got there, the whole wire had been cleared. Then, Natasha showed up behind her, popping the gum that was hiding the drive.

Stephanie had really wanted to trust Natasha, but that redhead was walking on thin ice. She watched her genuinely mourn Fury, but that didn’t make her completely innocent. No more giving her the benefit of the doubt. Stephanie roughly grabbed Natasha and shoved her into the other room, hitting her back against the wall.

“Where is it?” Stephanie growled.

“Safe.”

“Do better.”

“Where did you get it?” Natasha asked just as harshly.

“Why would I tell you?”

“…Fury gave it to you. Why?”

“What’s on it?” Stephanie was going to need some answers if Natasha wanted to keep her trust.

“I don’t know.”

“Stop lying!” Stephanie quietly exclaimed and squeezed Natasha’s arms harder.

“I only act like I know everything, Rogers.” Natasha responded cleverly, even though her pupils shifted back and forth in fear. Stephanie could believe that much. She looked around to make sure they were truly alone.

“I bet you knew Fury hired the pirates, didn’t you?” Stephanie asked, partially as a test. If Natasha played dumb, that would be suspicious. After all, it was Natasha herself who made Stephanie back off when she was questioning the mission.

“Well, it makes sense. The ship was dirty, Fury needed a way in, so do you-“

“I’m not going to ask you again.” Stephanie threw her into the wall one more time.

“I know who killed Fury.” Natasha blurted out, if only to satisfy Steph for a moment. It was enough to make her let go and wait for answer, “Most of the intelligence community doesn’t believe he exists. The ones that do call him the Winter Soldier. He’s credited with over two dozen assassinations in the last 50 years.”

That man on the roof definitely didn’t look like he’d been around for 50 years, “So he’s a ghost
“Five years ago, I was escorting a nuclear engineer out of Iran. Someone shot out my tires near Odessa. We lost control and went straight over a cliff. I pulled us out, but the Winter Soldier was there…” Natasha explained, with the same look that Stephanie had when she encountered him, “I was covering my engineer, so he shot him. Straight through me.”

Natasha pulled up her shirt revealing a rough pink scar on her abdomen, “Soviet slug. No rifling. Bye bye bikinis."

“Yeah I bet you look terrible in them now.” Stephanie joked. In those brief few seconds of silence, Natasha realized she had earned her trust back.

“Going after him is a dead end. I know, I’ve tried,” Natasha pulled the drive out of her pocket, “Like you said, he’s a ghost story.”

Stephanie took it back, the vitriol in her eyes dissipated, “Well let’s find out what the ghost wants.”

“The first rule of going on the run is don’t run, walk.” Natasha explained as she saw Stephanie wanted to make a break for it.

“If I run in these shoes, they’re going to fall off.” Stephanie couldn’t believe of all the lockers she raided, it was the one woman in the country who had bigger feet than her. Natasha had completed her sporty look for her with the help of a baseball cap with a hole for a ponytail and some thick rimmed glasses.

The Apple store at the mall was crowded enough to hide in plain sight, and it would allow them to see what was on the drive for themselves.

“The drive has a Level 6 homing program so as soon as we boot up, S.H.I.E.L.D will know exactly where we are.”

“How much time do we have?”

“About nine minutes from…now.” Natasha expertly typed up a storm after plugging in the drive, “Fury was right about that ship. Someone was trying to hide something. This drive is protected by some sort of AI that’s rewriting itself to counter my demands.”

“Can you override it?” Stephanie asked as she kept watch so Natasha could focus on the screen.

“The person who developed this is slightly smarter than me. Slightly.” Natasha looked up for a moment, “I’m going to try running a tracer. This is a program that S.H.I.E.L.D developed to track hostile malware, so if we can’t read the file, maybe we can find out where it came from.”

Suddenly, one of the employees obliviously interrupted, “Can I help you guys with anything?”

“Oh no, my fiancée was just helping me with some honeymoon destinations!” Natasha instantly turned bubbly and wrapped herself around Stephanie.

“Right…we’re getting married.” Stephanie didn’t know what else to say as she grinned like an idiot.

“Congratulations, where were you guys thinking about going?” The man cheerily asked.
Stephanie looked at the screen and spat out the first thing she saw, “New Jersey.”

As she looked back at the man, she saw his face contort like he realized something. Crap, was she really that obvious? Did this look like the kind of man who could guess what Captain America looked like outside the uniform?

“I have the exact same glasses.” He said.

“Wow, you two are practically twins.” Natasha added sarcastically, even though upon closer inspection, they did have the same long blonde hair. However, she couldn’t tell what his chin looked like under the beard.

“Yeah, I wish,” the employee awkwardly giggled and framed his hands around Stephanie, “Specimen.”

Stephanie didn’t know who blushed harder in embarrassment, herself or the employee, even if honestly that was one of the most innocent flirts she’d ever endured. Besides, she had bigger problems. At the very least, the awkward moment scared the employee away and left them to their business.

“You said nine minutes, C’mon.” Stephanie muttered anxiously.

“Sshh, relax…got it.” Natasha said proudly as the software pinpointed an exact location in… Wheaton, New Jersey. The same city where she trained under Colonel Phillips.

“You know it?” Natasha asked.

“I used to.” Stephanie muttered. Now was not the time for reminiscing, “Let’s go.”

As they walked out of the store, Stephanie recognized the S.T.R.I.K.E team wandering about trying to blend in as well, “Standard tac team. Two behind, two across, two coming straight at us. If they make us, I’ll engage, you hit the south escalator on the metro.”

“Shut up and put your arm around me. Laugh at something I said.”

“What?”

“Do it.”

As the two agents passed by, Stephanie grabbed Natasha’s shoulder and gave the most high pitched giggle she could muster, adding an extra “Oh my god, stop it!” to really sell it. The two guys didn’t even glance at the “bimbo” so they managed to dodge that bullet. All they had to do now was take the escalator down and exit out the food court.

Stephanie froze in a panic when she saw Rumlow coming up the escalator. He of all people would recognize her, and turning her back wouldn’t help at all. Natasha saw him too, as well as the fear on Stephanie’s face.

“Kiss me.” Natasha ordered.

“What?” Stephanie knew what it was for, but it still threw her off guard.

“Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable.”

“Yes, they do.” Stephanie protested, but Natasha grabbed her face and kissed her anyways. She let it continue until they reached the first floor. Honestly, Stephanie had been curious of what a kiss from
Natasha was like, but never expected it like this. Obviously it wasn’t fireworks, but she had to give her credit for the few butterflies.

“You still uncomfortable?” Natasha snickered.

“That’s not exactly the word I would use.”

“Where did Captain America learn to steal a car?” Natasha asked. Clearly she enjoyed everything Stephanie did that was less than wholesome.

“Nazi Germany.” Stephanie answered, “And we’re borrowing. Take your feet off the dash.”

Natasha did so with a knowing smile. She could see Stephanie was shaken up from more than just being a fugitive, her frown indicated guilt eating away at her, she could feel it.

“Alright, I got a question for you, but you do not have to answer. I feel like if you don’t answer it though, you’re kind of answering it, y’know?”

“What?” Stephanie just wanted to get this over with.

“Were you and Rumlow a thing?” Natasha asked.

Stephanie hissed and scrunched together like a painful shock ran up her spine, “Is it that obvious?”

“No, no. It’s just you seemed terrified of him on the escalator, but not like in the regular way, more of the “ex-boyfriend” kind of way-“

“He was never my boyfriend.” Stephanie asserted, her voice shaking as shame welled up in her eyes.

“You should have told me! No wonder he was giving me looks when I asked you about Saturday night.” Natasha wanted to laugh, but all Stephanie could feel was judgment.

“It was a one time thing…” Stephanie defended.

“You didn’t need me, after all. You can find a good time all on your own.” Natasha smiled.

“That’s not what I was looking for-“

“Although really, Rumlow? I would have never guessed he’d be your type-“

“Okay I get it, Romanoff. Captain America is a slut, and that’s hilarious!” Stephanie painfully smiled, with tears falling, “Everyone gets a kick out of seeing me do something dirty! They have the biggest dumbest smiles around me not because they enjoy being with me, but because me having a dick in my mouth is the punchline of the century. The day that I have wild, unholy, unmarried sex with someone is the day that American values die.”

“Woah, Steph, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.” Natasha’s pity in her voice only angered Stephanie more.

“Well it doesn’t matter, because that what everyone else thinks.” Stephanie pinched the bridge of her nose, trying to regain control of her breathing, “I should have never gone back to my maiden name.”

“Stephanie, that doesn’t matter. None of it does. You’re a big girl who can do what she wants.”
Natasha tried to soothe her.

“Well it does to me. Maybe I would’ve been better off as just the sad Mrs. Barnes who swore off love for the rest of her life.”

“Trust me, that’s not realistic. You’re 95, you’re not dead.”

“Believe it or not, it’s kind of hard to find someone with shared life experience.” Stephanie wiped her cheeks dry.

“That’s alright, you can just make something up.” Natasha kindly smiled.

“What, like you?” Stephanie wondered if the “Black Widow” was just an assigned codename or based off of a reputation.

“I don’t know, the truth is a matter of circumstance. It’s not all things, to all people all the time.” Natasha shrugged, “Neither am I.”

Stephanie couldn’t imagine being with someone who she had to fabricate a persona to all the time, “That’s a tough way to live.”

“It’s a good way not to die though.”

“You know, it’s kind of hard to trust someone when you don’t know who that someone really is.” Stephanie said.

“Yeah…” Natasha nodded, like she had learned this the hard way, “Who do you want me to be?”

“How about a friend?” Stephanie suggested, “Who tells no one about me and Rumlow?”

Natasha chuckled, “There’s a chance you might be in the wrong business, Rogers.”
“This is it?” Stephanie asked as she stood outside the rusted gates.

“The file came from these coordinates.” Natasha said, sounding surprised and somewhat disappointed.

“So did I.” Stephanie shivered, staring thoughtfully at the metal sign that read “CAMP LEHIGH”; this whole ordeal was feeling far more personal than she expected.

Breaking in wasn’t difficult, but finding the wireless signal was a pain in the ass. They looked in every building and walked every inch of dirt twice. Stephanie insisted they keep going. They’d come too far to hit a dead end now.

“This camp is where I was trained.” Stephanie said as the sunlight waned. Once it got too dark, they’d have no choice but to reconsider their options.

“Change much?” Natasha asked, barely in the mood for chit chat.

“A little.” Stephanie had seen so many of her favorite streets and buildings remodeled beyond recognition that it felt nice to see everything right where she left it, for once. Even the flagpole that she took down to get a ride with Peggy was still standing, even touching it now would get rust on her fingers. She wondered if anyone else figured out the trick after her. She didn’t even know if the guy who got the flag seventeen years before her pulled out the support beam of if he just climbed his way to the top.

“Pick up the pace, ladies! Let’s go, let’s go! Double time!”

The drill sergeant didn’t see the irony in calling the whole group ladies, or maybe he just didn’t care. Peggy did the same thing after all. It’s just something they would do. She could feel the stampede of soldiers trying to run past each other but still keeping themselves in a herd.

“C’mon Barnes, move it!”

And then there was her, way behind everyone else, back in the days when her biggest challenge was finding people to believe in skinny little Stephanie Rogers Barnes. She could see her chicken legs leaping as far as they could, and just two laps around the track was enough to leave her wheezing. The ghost of herself stopped in front of her, so bright and starry-eyed despite the exhaustion.

“C’mon, fall in! Barnes! I said fall in!”

She wanted to cheer up that coughing and sweating young woman by telling her that all her efforts would be worth it. Dr. Erskine was going to choose her over everyone else because he believed she was a good person. Agent Carter wasn’t just going to notice her; she was going to become her closest friend. And Bucky…Bucky was going to love her no matter what she looked like, so don’t worry about resentment or rejection.

Of course, it would be too cruel to tell her she would get everything she wanted without warning her that it would cost her everything she had. There was no way to prepare her for that. She would have to learn to take things as they come.

“This is a dead end.” Natasha finally said it, pulling Steph out of her dream state, “Zero heat signatures. Zero waves. Not even radio. Whoever wrote the file must have used a router to throw
people off.”

Stephanie was still taking in the ghosts from her past when noticed the odd thing out. That munitions building wasn’t there before. It couldn’t be… because…

“What is it?” Natasha noticed Stephanie focusing on something.

“Army regulations forbid storing munitions within 500 yards of the barracks. This building’s in the wrong place.” Stephanie explained, rushing towards it and breaking the lock with her shield.

They warily crept into the dark and dusty office, and turning on the lights revealed an eagle symbol on the wall.

“This is S.H.I.E.L.D.” Natasha commented in surprise.

“Maybe where it started.” Stephanie added, surveying all the desks and chairs for any sign of modern technology. The back room was mostly filled with old furniture and abandoned office supplies, but on the wall were the portraits of S.H.I.E.L.D.’s founders.

“There’s Stark’s father.” Natasha pointed out the middle one.

“Howard.” Stephanie reminded her. She had to refer to them by their first names now that she knew two Stark men, even if one of them was dead. On the left side of Howard’s picture was Col. Phillips. She honestly couldn’t believe he still believe in her cause after she recklessly almost got herself killed on multiple occasions. On the right side…

“Who’s the girl?” Natasha asked.

Stephanie couldn’t answer. They had a mission to complete. She already wasted too much time reminiscing, and if she dwelled on how heartbroken Peggy would be if she knew what was becoming of it now. She had to focus on something else, like the airstream that was blowing on the cobwebs from behind the bookcase.

“If you’re already working in a secret office…” Stephanie thought out loud as she pulled the bookcase to the side, “Why do you need to hide the elevator?”

With a quick fingerprint scan, Natasha was able to punch in the code. Steph kept her shield up in the event something was waiting for them on the bottom floor. The elevator only traveled to one other floor, but it traveled through what could have been ten floors. Steph stayed close to Natasha when the doors opened up to darkness. As they approached closer, there was some illuminations from the machines, and once they got close enough the lights buzzed on, revealing the floor filled with modems and monitors.

“This can’t be the data point. This technology’s ancient.” Natasha wandered around, genuinely confused, until the blue light of a drive port caught her eye. The design matched the drive, so she stuck it in like a key in a lock. Suddenly the computers breathed with life and the monitor in the control deck lit up.

“Initiate system?” The robotic voice croaked.

“Y-E-S, spells yes.” Natasha typed in a response, and grinned with intrigue as she heard something power up.

“Shall we play a game?” She joked, “It’s from a movie that was really p-“
“I know. I saw it.” Stephanie remembered all their 80’s movie nights, which was everyone else’s favorite. Most of her team members were children when those movies came out, so even if they weren’t very good, they missed the innocence they had the first time they watched them. She got that feeling on Disney movie night when they watched Snow White.

“Rogers, Stephanie. Born 1918.” Waves of green static barely shaped out a bespectacled face on the monitor, and a camera on top whirred as a scanned the two of them, “Romanoff, Natalia Alianovna. Born 1984.”

“It’s some kind of recording?” Natasha guessed.

“I am not a recording, Fraulein. I may not be the man I was when the Captain took me prisoner in 1945, but I am.”

Chills ran down Stephanie’s spine as a picture popped up on the secondary monitor, Arnim Zola, the man who took her Bucky away.

“You know this thing?”

Stephanie tried to remain calm and look for the key to this trick, “Arnim Zola was a German scientist who worked for the Red Skull. He’s been dead for years.”

“First correction, I am Swiss. Second, look around you. I have never been more alive. In 1972, I received a terminal diagnosis. Science could not save my body. My mind, however, that was worth saving on 200,000 feet of data banks. You are standing in my brain.”

“How’d you get here?” Stephanie asked, going along with the idea that she was talking to the real thing.

“Invited.” The monitor chirped.


“They thought I could help their cause. I also helped my own.”

“Hydra died with the Red Skull.” Stephanie asserted.

“Cut off one head,” the face on the monitor multiplied itself, “Two more shall take its place.”

“Prove it.” Stephanie snarled.

“Accessing archive,” The computer played video footage of Hydra soldiers at war, “Hydra was founded on the belief that man could not be trusted with its own freedom. What we did not realize is that if you try to take that freedom, they resist.”

Clips of her and her commandoes storming their bases.

“The war taught us much. Humanity needed to surrender its freedom willingly. After the war, S.H.I.E.L.D was founded, and I was recruited. The new Hydra grew, a beautiful parasite within S.H.I.E.L.D.”

Newspaper clippings of Zola being released from custody, accepted into their ranks, beside Howard and Peggy. They couldn’t have underestimated him, could they? He looked mousey, but they knew firsthand what he was capable of! They helped her rescue Bucky from his clutches. How could this
have happened?!

“For 70 years, Hydra had been secretly feeding crisis, reaping war, and when history did not cooperate, history was changed.”

The assassin…the Winter Soldier was in the footage. He was Hydra scum as low as Zola himself.

“That’s impossible. S.H.I.E.L.D would have stopped you.” Natasha argued, as genuinely frightened as Stephanie was.

“Accidents will happen.”

Howard Stark and Nick Fury’s files, both marked deceased, along with their obituaries and the clipping of Howard’s accident with a grisly picture of his corpse in the car’s front seat.

“Hydra created a world so chaotic that humanity is finally willing to sacrifice its freedom to gain its security. Once the purification process is complete, Hydra’s new world order will arise. We won, Captain. Your death amounts the same as your life. A zero sum.”

Stephanie punched the monitor, shattering the screen and silencing him, but only for a few seconds.

“As I was saying…” the toad-like face came back on a different monitor.

“What’s on this drive?!” Stephanie demanded, furious he had no bones to break.

“Project Insight requires…insight. So I wrote an algorithm.”

“What kind of algorithm? What does it do?” Natasha pressed on.

“The answer to your question is fascinating. Unfortunately, you shall be too dead to hear it.”

The doors whooshed as they raced to shut, and Stephanie’s shield wasn’t quick enough to jam them. Natasha pulled out her phone.

“Steph, we got a bogey. Short–range ballistic…30 seconds, tops.” She warned.

“Who fired it?!” Stephanie yelled.

“…S.H.I.E.L.D.” Natasha’s voice dropped.

“I am afraid I have been stalling, Captain. Admit it, it’s better this way. We are both of us…out of time.”

Shelter. If they couldn’t escape the room, they had to find the closest shelter. All these machines needed cool air to keep them operating, which would have to come from a vent, but there was nothing on the walls or ceilings, which meant they had to be…

Stephanie quickly threw off the metal grid on the floor’s ventilation shafts and grabbed Natasha. The deafening boom and blistering heat hit just as they leaped into the hole, with Steph covering them both. Concrete and dirt poured in like hail, surrounding them until it buried them. Stephanie swore she heard Natasha scream.

Stephanie waited until everything went silent and the debris settled before pushing the giant slab of concrete out of her way. She pulled herself out and reached for Natasha’s hand, but it didn’t squeeze back. She reached back in and grabbed Natasha’s limp body, and thankfully she was still warm and faintly breathing.
Soon, the helicopters came with searchlights looking for their assumed dead bodies. She carried Natasha out of the rubble as quickly as she could, sprinting for the roads where hopefully she could find a way back to D.C in time. Natasha would be pleased to meet her *actual* new boyfriend.
Recruiting the Falcon

Stephanie didn’t know where Sam lived, but she knew where he went every morning. She and Natasha followed him home after his run, but waited until he went inside to ask for his help.

“How did you not know where he lives? You said he was your new boyfriend.” Natasha asked as Stephanie knocked.

“Well, we’ve only had one date, but all my other suitors turned out to be Hydra, so he wins by default.” Stephanie said, knowing she was going to be asking a lot from him, but he was her only chance.

Sam opened the blinds first before opening the door. He could tell that she wasn’t just there for a friendly visit, but he calmly said, “Hey girl.”

“I’m sorry about this. We need a place to lay low.” Stephanie clutched her elbows tightly.

“Everyone we know is trying to kill us.” Natasha added.

“Not everyone.” Sam stood aside to invite them in, and quickly shut the door and closed the blinds behind them.

The first thing the ladies needed was to wash off all the dust and grime. Since they were guests, Stephanie suggested they shower together to save the hot water. While they scrubbed the blood off their cuts and the debris out of their hair, Sam put their clothes in the wash for them, leaving them some of his spare tanks on the bed in the guest room.

As they patted their hair down with towels, Stephanie looked at Natasha’s wistful stare. Before, she used to just back off, assuming she could never understand what was going on in Natasha’s head, but now, it was worth a shot to try.

“You okay?” She asked.

“Yeah.” Natasha brushed her off nicely, but Steph was persistent.

“What’s going on?” Steph asked, almost maternally, taking a seat on the bed and locking her eyes on hers.

“When I first joined S.H.I.E.L.D, I thought I was going straight,” Natasha swallowed difficultly, “but I guess I just traded in the KGB for Hydra. I thought I knew whose lies I was telling but…I guess I can’t tell the difference anymore.”

Stephanie thought back to what Natasha told her earlier, that she only acted like she knew everything. Now she could see that Natasha, the Black Widow who almost always had the upper hand, was as scared and confused as she was. More importantly, she was allowing herself to be scared and confused in front of her, just like how she cried in front of her when Fury was murdered.

“There’s a chance you might be in the wrong business.” Stephanie smiled.

“I owe you.” Natasha told her seriously.

“It’s okay.” Stephanie shook her head. Saving Natasha’s life wasn’t a favor. What else was she supposed to do for her friend?
“If it was the other way around, and it was down to me to save your life, can you be honest with me?” Natasha looked sternly at her, as if this was a tough question, “Would you trust me to do it?”

“I would now.” Stephanie answered wholeheartedly, “and I’m always honest.”

“Well you seem pretty chipper for someone who found out they died for nothing.” Natasha smiled.

“Well…” Stephanie leaned back. It was disappointing to learn that she had failed to destroy Hydra, but at the same time, Hydra had failed to destroy her, too. Maybe that’s why fate pulled her from everything she knew and loved and forced her to live on. If she had died in the ice like she wanted to, there would be no one standing in Hydra’s way now, and everything she stood for would die. Perhaps, she belonged here after all, “Guess I just like to know who I’m fighting.”

“I made breakfast,” Sam interrupted from the doorway, “If you guys…eat that sort of thing.”

Natasha raised her eyebrows at Steph, “He cooks and does laundry. You’ve got yourself a catch.”

“So the question is who at S.H.I.E.L.D can launch a domestic missile strike?” Natasha said. They started making battle plans halfway through breakfast.

“Pierce.” Stephanie exhaled. She knew there was something off about him, even before he subtly threatened her.

“Who happens to be sitting on top of the most secure building in the world.” Natasha added, both to confirm her idea and make note that he wouldn’t be easy to get to.

“He’s not working alone. Zola’s algorithm was on the Lumerian Star.” Stephanie knew they’d have to start small and work their way to the top.

“…so was Jasper Sitwell.” It hit Natasha like an epiphany, and then spread to Stephanie.

“So the real question is how did the two most wanted people in Washington kidnap a S.H.I.E.L.D officer in broad daylight.”

“The answer is you don’t.” Sam dropped a file in front of her.

“What’s this?”

“Call it a resume.”

Both Stephanie and Natasha grabbed pieces of the file, with Natasha taking the picture on top, “Is this Bakhmala? The Khalid Khandil mission, that was you? You didn’t say he was a pararescue.”

Stephanie took the picture and looked at the young man walking next to Sam, “Is this Riley?”

“Yeah.” Sam answered sadly. Stephanie’s heart sunk with his.

“I heard they couldn’t bring in the choppers because of the RPGs. What did you use? A stealth suit?” Natasha asked.

“No,” Sam handed them the big manila folder, “These.”

Stephanie raised her eyebrows at the gear depicted in the file, genuinely impressed, “I thought you
said you were a pilot.”

“I never said pilot.” Sam retorted with a cheeky smile.

Stephanie’s smile fell as she thought harder, “I can’t ask you to do this, Sam. You got out for a good reason.”

“Girl, Captain America needs my help. There’s no better reason to get back in.” Sam crossed his arms, insisting he wasn’t backing out. She didn’t know if he was doing this to impress her or not, but she knew it was good to have someone like him on the team.

“Where can we get our hands on one of these things?” Stephanie asked.

“The last one is at Fort Meade, behind three guarded gates and a twelve-inch steel wall.” Sam explained.

Nat shrugged and nodded. Nothing out of the ordinary for her, so Stephanie chirped, “Shouldn’t be a problem.”

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Natasha programmed Sam’s phone to present the Caller ID as Alexander Pierce, and from there Sam performed his job beautifully, luring Agent Sitwell in and bringing him to them on the roof of an abandoned building. Stephanie had some doubts she could do this, but Natasha assured her that if she could get the Black Widow to shiver, then she could handle this guy.

Stephanie threw Sitwell out the doorway to the roof of the building, making him roll on the cement, “Tell me about Zola’s algorithm.”

“Never heard of it.” He picked himself back up and fixed his glasses, but backed away from her as she charged forward.

“What were you doing on the Lumerian Star?” Stephanie asked lowly but calmly.

“I was throwing up. I get seasick.” Sitwell almost tripped off the building but she caught him by the shirt and held him up. He smiled at her like he was calling a bluff, “Is this little display meant to insinuate that you’re going to throw me off the roof? Because it’s really not your style, Rogers.”

Stephanie calmed her face and set him down, brushing the wrinkles off his sleeves, “You’re right. It’s not…It’s hers.”

Natasha kicked him off the roof.

“So, tell me. Rumlow, how was he?” Natasha asked with curious smirk.

“Not bad, for, you know, a Hydra agent.”

“Really now?”

He’s a wet kisser though…” Stephanie admitted, before scrunching up her face in disgust, “Oh God, I’m going to need to throw out that couch.”

“I have so much more respect for you now.”

Soon enough, Sam, in his full EXO-7 Falcon gear, flew up to the roof with a screaming Agent
Sitwell. Once he dropped him off, Stephanie and Natasha marched over to give it another shot. Luckily, that wasn’t necessary.

“Zola’s algorithm is a program!” Sitwell cowered and tried to catch his breath, “…for choosing Insight’s targets.”

“What targets?” Steph demanded.

“You! A TV anchor in Cairo, the other Secretary of Defense, a high school valedictorian in Iowa City, Bruce Banner, Stephen Strange, anyone who’s a threat to Hydra! Now, or in the future…”

“The future? How could it know?”

Sitwell laughed and got off his knees, “How could it not? The 21st century is a digital book. Zola taught Hydra how to read it. Your bank records, medical histories, voting patterns, e-mails, phone calls, your damn SAT scores…Zola’s algorithm evaluates peoples’ past to predict their future.”

“What then?” Stephanie asked, remaining calm through her horror.

Sitwell drew back in fear, “Oh my God, Pierce is going to kill me…”

“What then?!” Stephanie asked louder and stood closer.

“…then the Insight Helicarriers scratch people off the list…a few million at a time.”
“Hydra doesn’t like leaks.” Sitwell said from the backseat, more concerned with his own safety than theirs.

“Then why don’t you try sticking a cork in it?” Sam snapped from the driver’s seat.

“Insight’s launching in 16 hours. We’re cutting it a bit close here.” Natasha peeked towards the front seats.

“I know. We’ll use him to bypass the DNA scans and access the helicarriers directly.” Stephanie explained her plan.

“What? Are you crazy?” Sitwell exclaimed, not that anyone was listening to him, “That is a terrible terrible idea-“

Suddenly, something broke through the window and pulled Sitwell through, throwing him several lanes over just as a large truck passed by. With Sitwell gone, so was their plan. Whatever killed him didn’t stop there. Natasha could hear the movements on the roof of the car, so she evaded the path of bullets, crawling up to the front and pulling Stephanie and Sam’s heads out of the way. Sam slammed on the brakes, which flung the killer ahead of them. They watched him fly and gracefully land on his feet like a cat, with his metal arm screeching as he brought himself to a halt.

It was the same killer from before, the one that Stephanie doubted was even human. He stood before them, still and threatening behind a mask and goggles. She wanted to jump out of the car and smash his face so badly, but Natasha was one step ahead of her, grabbing her gun and aiming at his head. However, another vehicle rammed them from behind, knocking her gun out of her hands and forcing them closer towards the soulless creature. Just when they were about to hit him, he flipped over the hood and landed back on the car roof, breaking the rear window. The brakes didn’t help this time; the car pushing them kept their momentum going and he clung to the car with his whole body.

The metal arm broke through the windshield and tore the steering wheel right out of Sam’s hands. Stephanie wasn’t sure if even she was that strong. Now that Natasha knew where he was, she fired at him as he jumped to the car behind them.

Stephanie knew they had to ditch the car immediately, but the damage from the back and jammed all the doors. Another hit made Sam swerve towards the barrier, almost flipping the car over.

“Hang on!” Stephanie ordered as she grabbed Natasha and Sam and forced her way through the car door, ripping it from its hinges. That and the shield took the impact of the sliding against the asphalt. Sam couldn’t hold on for long though and rolled off to the side. Once Stephanie and Natasha stopped on their own, Stephanie looked up to see the vehicle gaining on them pull over and give the assassin a bazooka. She pushed Natasha towards Sam before he launched it, and took the full hit with her shield. The blast propelled her backwards like a rocket, off the highway and into a city bus. With Stephanie out of the way, Natasha and Sam had to fend for themselves against the assassin, which was no big challenge for Natasha. Once she got off the highway, he completely ignored Sam, since she was his real target.

Stephanie had blacked out for a few seconds, but when she came to, the bus was on its side and the civilians had scattered. She heard the rattling of machine guns come closer to her, and sprinted out of the bus, miraculously finding her shield right outside. She saw the attacker shooting from the top of an abandoned car, and rushed at him under her shield’s protection. She knocked the artillery out of
his grip and flipped him over off the car.

There was one more guy behind another car, but he wasn’t aiming at her. She looked up to see that he was firing at Sam, but Sam taken someone else’s assault rifle and fired right back.

“Go! I got this!” Sam shouted.

Stephanie looked around and didn’t see the killer anywhere near her. Natasha…he was going after Natasha. If Stephanie hadn’t seen the scar, she would’ve assumed that her friend had this guy covered, but she knew that if she didn’t hurry, Natasha could die. Her blood boiled and ran towards the streets. She wasn’t going to let this monster lay one more hand on her friends.

She found him on top of a car, armed and ready to pull the trigger. She leaped towards him, and shielded herself from a mighty punch that rang against the metal like a church bell. When she pulled the shield away, he jumped and kicked her in the chest, knocking her off the car. She crawled in a ball behind the shield to avoid his gunfire and ran in a circle around him until she got close enough to kick his weapon away, but without missing a beat, he pulled a handgun from behind and kept shooting at her. How many guns did this guy have on him?

She knocked that gun out of his hands as well, forcing the coward to fight her straight on. When she swung her shield at him, however, he grabbed it, and spun her around instead, pulling it out of her grip. She wasn’t used to fighting people holding her own shield, and now she knew the frustration of every punch being thrown out of the way by the thing. One solid punch from him knocked her back. She thought she hated him before, but now she wanted to knock his head off his shoulders. As she raced towards him, he threw the shield, but not at her. She saw the shield embedded in the back of a van. He disposed of it like it was trash, pulling a knife from his belt. His hands were quick, but she blocked every attack, with a few close calls making her heart race in fear.

In his flurry of attacks, he didn’t do much to defend himself, and she landed a serious punch to his jaw, making him grunt, which gave her a wave of satisfaction. The punch knocked him off his concentration, and she jumped and spin-kicked him in the chest, making him fly backwards for once. Before he could steady himself, she charged and knee’d him in the stomach. He caught her next punch, but when he tried to attack her, she flipped him to the ground.

She grabbed for him, but his metal arm shot up and wrapped the cold hard fingers around her throat. It whirred horribly as it squeezed the muscle, closing her airway. He pulled her closer to him and threw her over the mess of cars. She heard him approaching and rolled out of the way before the metal fist could hit her. She got up and blocked his strikes with her elbows, but got kicked back against the van. The knife in his metal hand made her gasp and brace defensively, keeping the blade inches away from her face as the motor in his arm pushed it through the van and across the side. She ducked away from it, grabbed his abdomen, and flipped him backwards, knocking them both to the ground. She took their brief recovery moments to grab her shield out of the van and block his knife attacks. Still, he was quick enough to punch her once across the cheek. She took advantage of his big swings to jam her shield into the gears around his elbow, stopping him long enough to slide the shield into his face. She spun and grabbed him by the chin, with her fingers wrapped around the mask. When she pulled him over her shoulder, he rolled away from her, and the mask fell off. Finally, she could look the hideous thing right in the face and tell him…

When the metal-armed man looked straight at her, her whole body tingled in disbelief. Those eyes… why didn’t she recognize them before?

“Bucky?” She choked out, swallowing every nasty thought she had before. All this time? How was this possible? Who did this?
“Who the hell is Bucky?” He said, taking deadly aim. That was his voice. It really was him. She didn’t try to stop him, but Sam flew in just in time to knock him off balance. The next few seconds slowed down for her. Every sound went in one ear and out the other. Bucky grabbed his gun, but didn’t fire it right away. When their eyes met, her heart collapsed. She didn’t see a monster anymore, she saw the man.

Please look at me. Take a good look at me. It’s me, Stephanie. She pleaded with her eyes, her breath heaving, but the moment was gone. He turned back into a machine and aimed at her. She jumped back defensively, and from behind her, Natasha fired at him, but missed. The van exploded, and he disappeared into the black smoke. She wanted to go after him, but he fled too quickly.

When the S.T.R.I.K.E team showed up and surrounded them, she could barely hear Rumlow screaming at her. She didn’t even feel his kick that knocked her on her knees. There was no strength left in her anyway. It sunk in that man she was fighting with such hatred was her husband, or at least what was left of him. Hydra hadn’t just killed her love. They defiled him. Her lips were silent, but her soul was screaming.
“It was him.” Stephanie avoided everyone’s pitying eyes. She felt rock heavy in the back of the van that was presumably taking them all back to the Triskelion. They made special arrangements for her, keeping her in steel cuffs that covered the length of her arms and locked her legs into the seat.

“He looked right at me…” Stephanie’s eyes welled up and it became hard to breathe, “…and he didn’t even know me.”

“How is that even possible? It was like 70 years ago.” Sam asked.

“Zola…” Stephanie wiped her nose on her shoulder, “Bucky’s whole unit was captured in ’43. Zola experimented on him. Whatever he did must’ve helped Bucky survive the fall. I knew he was different. He told me he didn’t feel right. He told me so many times. I knew he wasn’t well. I knew it, and I wanted to help him. I thought he would get better once we went home, but- They must have found him, and-“

“None of that’s your fault, Steph.” Natasha wearily interrupted.

“Even when I had nothing, I had Bucky…” Stephanie let all the tears fall, “I should’ve jumped after him! We left him there to die! He was alive and I wasn’t there for him. They took him from me! They took everything from me!”

Sam wanted to comfort Stephanie, but quickly noticed that Natasha’s shoulder wouldn’t stop bleeding. He sternly told the guard, “We need to get a doctor here. If we don’t put pressure on that wound, she’s going to bleed out here in the truck.”

The helmeted guard intimidated him with a taser baton, but suddenly turned it and stunned the guard next to them instead, and then they kicked him in the head to knock him out cold. Even Stephanie stopped crying in surprise.

The guard removed her helmet to reveal herself as Agent Hill, “Ugh, that thing was squeezing my brain.”

Everyone looked at her, speechless.

“Who’s this guy?”

With Agent Hill on their side, they quickly escaped the van with some sort of laser knife technology freeing Stephanie of her bondage and cutting a hole in the floor of the car. Once they were on the ground, they let the trail of jeeps drive over them until they could jack the last one. Maria said that she was taking them to a safehouse, but it was actually the sewage tunnels near the dam. Both Stephanie and Sam helped Natasha out of the car as she held her own wound.

“GSW. She’s lost at least a pint.” Maria called out to the doctor rushing towards them.

“Maybe two.” Sam added.

“Let me take her.” The doctor said.
“She’ll want to see him first.” Maria said. Stephanie and Natasha looked at each other. See who first?

Maria pulled back the plastic curtain, and Nick Fury himself lay in a hospital bed, weak, but alive,

“About damn time.”

Apparently, Stephanie wasn’t the only one to see her loved one come back from the dead. She saw tears in Natasha’s eyes, and not from the pain of her shoulder or Stephanie’s sob story.

“Lacerated spinal column, cracked sternum, shattered collarbone, perforated liver, and one hell of a headache.” Fury dryly listed his injuries.

“Don’t forget your collapsed lung.” The doctor pressed on Natasha’s shoulder as she sat in a chair.

“Oh, let’s not forget that,” Fury groaned, “but otherwise, I’m good.”

“They cut you open. Your heart stopped.” Natasha said, remembering how certain she was that he was gone when his line went dead.

“Tetradotoxin B, slows the pulse to one beat per minute. Banner developed it for stress. Didn’t work so great for him, but we found a use for it.”

“Why all the secrecy?” Stephanie wiped her red eyes. She had enough lies today, “Why not just tell us?”

“Any attempt on the Director’s life had to look successful.” Agent Hill explained.

“Can’t kill you if you’re already dead.” Fury added, “Besides, I wasn’t sure who to trust.”

Deep in a guarded bank vault, the Winter Soldier lay strapped to a chair as Hydra’s technicians tuned up his mechanical arm.

“Sergeant Barnes.”

He sees the balding wrinkled doctor with the round glasses, and hears the name creep out of his lips. He see a fast-moving train in the snowy mountains.

“Bucky! No!”

The woman screams as she reaches for him. He feels the falling and hears his own screaming as the icy rapids get closer.

“The procedure has already started.”

He looks at the stump where his arm used to be, leaving a blood trail in the snow as men in big coats drag him away. He’s surrounded by doctors who stick him and saw off the dead tissue.

“You are to be the new fist of Hydra.”

He looks down at his hands, one is flesh and the other is silver. One of the doctors gets too close, and he strangles him, testing the power of the new hand they gave him to make him more of a machine and less of a man.
He’s trapped in the metal box, icicles poking him no matter where he moves, like an iron maiden. The air gets colder, he shivers until his muscles lock. He touches the glass window, his only look into the outside world as it frosts over, and lets out one last cloudy breath.

When he came to, he had already thrown one of the techs across the room. The surrounding agents instantly turned their guns to him, ready to fire if he stepped out of line even one more time. He remained still, playing the memory of the woman screaming for him over and over again. She looked like the woman who called him Bucky earlier. She called him Bucky then, too. How did she know him? Was she a former handler? He never remembered his former handlers.

“Mission report.” Pierce sternly ordered, but the Winter Soldier was still deep in his own thoughts. That was never good.

“Mission report now.” He got on the Soldier’s eye level and saw how glassy they were. He wasn’t sure if he was brain dead or just being insolent, either way, a hard back-handed slap knocked him out of it.

“The woman on the bridge…” The Winter Soldier remembered the desperation in her eyes, “…who was she?”

“You met her earlier this week on another assignment.” Pierce answered.

“…I knew her.” He was as certain as could be that she was the same woman from the train.

Pierce knew this could happen. He was going to see his wife’s face and it was going to stir something, but he also knew the Winter Soldier followed orders before all else, so he just had to distract him with another order,

“Your work has been a gift to mankind. You shaped the century, and I need you to do it one more time.”

The Winter Soldier glared at Pierce. He knew he was dodging his question. If he wasn’t willing to tell him, it had to be something he wasn’t supposed to know. If the woman was trying to trick him, they should just say so. Why would she call him Bucky?

“Society is at a tipping point between order and chaos. Tomorrow morning, we’re going to give it a push, but if you don’t do your part, I can’t do mine, and Hydra can’t give the world the freedom it deserves.” Pierce lectured.

The Winter Soldier could guess that he was asking him to kill Captain Rogers, the woman who called him Bucky, but he wanted answers from her first,

“But I knew her.”

Pierce took a deep breath and stood back up, like he was dealing with a disobedient child, “Prep him.”

“He’s been out of cryo-freeze too long.” The scientist protested.

“Then wipe him, and start over.”

The Winter Soldier’s face went sour when he realized what was coming. Whatever there was to Captain Rogers, they didn’t want him to know, and he was stupid for asking. They pushed him back
into the seat and gave him the mouthguard. He opened his mouth for it willingly. The smallest hint of rebellion wasn’t worth biting his own tongue off.

The chair leaned back, and the machines hummed louder as they powered up. His arms and legs were locked in as the big metal claws sparked with electricity and clutched his head. The powerful shocks made him wail and convulse until all curiosity about the woman from the train was gone.
The New Mission

Director Fury looked regretfully at a picture of Alexander Pierce from the 90’s, “This man declined the Nobel Peace Prize. He said peace wasn’t an achievement. It was a responsibility.”

He dropped the picture on the table and addressed his team, “You see, it’s stuff like this that gives me trust issues.”

He looked at Stephanie, who still looked back at him bitterly. She didn’t doubt that Fury felt betrayed, but that wasn’t going to make her go easy on him.

“We have to stop the launch.” Natasha stated the mission.

“I don’t think the Council is accepting my calls anymore.” Fury opened a black briefcase, revealing three chips neatly cushioned in foam.

“What’s that?” Sam asked.

“Once the helicarriers reach 3,000 feet, they’ll triangulate with Insight satellites and become fully weaponized.” Agent Hill showed the projection of the signals on her laptop.

“We need to breach those carriers and replace their targeting blades with our own.”

“One or two won’t cut it. We need to link all three carriers for this to work, because if even of those ships remains operational, a whole lot of people are going to die.”

“We have to assume everyone aboard those carriers is Hydra. We have to get past them, insert these server blades, and maybe, just maybe, we can salvage what’ left-“

“We’re not salvaging anything!” Stephanie cut in, “We’re not just taking down the carriers, Nick. We’re taking down S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“S.H.I.E.L.D had nothing to do with-“ Nick didn’t like her tone, but Stephanie didn’t care. She knew that he was all for using this weapon of mass destruction on their enemies, but now that the tables were turned on him, the whole thing was finally put in perspective.

“You gave me this mission. This is how it ends.” Stephanie asserted planting her hand on the table firmly, “S.H.I.E.L.D’s been compromised, you said so yourself. Hydra grew right under your nose, and nobody noticed.”

“Why do you think we’re meeting in this cave?” Fury argued, “I noticed.”

“How many paid the price before you did?” Stephanie snapped. The whole table got quiet. Everyone knew this was going to come up, and it was going to be ugly.

“Look, I didn’t know about your husband…” Fury admitted in a low voice.

“Even if you had, would you have told me?” Stephanie crossed her arms, sending chills throughout the room, “Or would you have compartmentalized that too?”

Fury didn’t have an answer for that.

“S.H.I.E.L.D. Hydra, it all goes.” Stephanie demanded. It felt good to know that doubt she’d been carrying since she started this job hadn’t been wrong. Still, Director Fury looked at her like she was
insane.

“She’s right.” Agent Hill nodded sadly, surprising Fury. He turned to Natasha, who leaned back in her chair. She wasn’t going to take his side this time. Finally, he turned to Sam.

“Don’t look at me,” Sam shrugged, “I do what she does. Just slower.”

Fury took one last scan of his defiant team. He straightened up and sighed in defeat.

“Well, looks like you’re giving the orders now, Captain.”

She woke up when she heard the tent flap open and closed. She swept her hand over his side of the cot to find it had already gone cold. She turned on her flashlight and looked at the clock. 2:15 in the morning, a few hours before their alarm. Her heart raced, assuming the worst. Had he been kidnapped right out of their tent? Did something happen to him?

She jumped up and threw her robe over her nightgown, and rushed out of the tent. She looked around and saw someone stomping their way into the forest.

“Hey!” She ran after the guy. It was too dark to see more than an outline of him. As soon as he realized she was coming after him, he started running into the trees. Once she got close enough she pounced on him, knocking them both into a bed of leaves.

“Ah!” He exclaimed, and from his voice, she recognized it was Bucky all along.

“Oh Buck, I’m sorry. I thought someone was trying to take you.” She crawled off of him and helped him back on his feet, “What are you doing out here?”

“Just trying to go for a walk.” He groaned and headed for the forest path, but she grabbed his arm before he could take another step.

“At this hour? Don’t be ridiculous. Come back to bed.” She pulled on him, but he resisted.

“I can’t sleep.” He slipped his arm free and kept walking.

“I’ll make you some tea. Come on.” She followed behind him, but he walked faster, trying to get her off his tail, “Honey? What’s wrong?”

“I just need to be alone.” He groaned.

“Was it another nightmare?” She asked, still trailing him past the trees until the moon couldn’t shine through, “Bucky, we have to talk about it. We can work this out.”

“It’s not that.” He brushed her off. This is why he tried not to wake her. He knew she’d do this, “Leave me alone.”

“Bucky, please don’t!” She cried out, and finally he stopped. Her voice trembled like she was going to cry. He heard her sniffling and went back to hold her.

“Stephanie…” He muttered softly as he pulled her in his arms. Now, she could feel how sweaty and cold he was.

“I just need to work this one out by myself.” He kissed her and put his forehead on hers, “Okay?
“Just this once.”

“Okay...” She mumbled, “…but be back in time for breakfast.”

He laughed and kissed her again before pulling away and slipping his hand out of hers. She watched him take a few more steps before heading back to their tent, looking back until he disappeared into the shadows.

Stephanie stood at the bridge over the river, looking out in the forests surrounding her. It wasn’t just that one time. He did that several times after that. The first couple of times she tried to get him to stay, but soon she figured he needed the space. As long as he came back safe and sound, he would be fine, right? She wondered if he knew then what he was turning into. He told her that sometimes he didn’t recognize himself in the mirror, but was he seeing the Winter Soldier? More importantly, could the Winter Soldier possibly look in the mirror and see Bucky Barnes?

“He’s gonna be there, y’know?” Sam joined her on the bridge.

“I know.” Stephanie said. She had to give Sam props for sticking around in these circumstances. She trusted he wasn’t here to try to win her over her “ex.”

“Look, whoever he used to be…” Sam started, “…the guy he is now…I don’t think he’s the kind you save. He’s the kind you stop.”

She knew that Sam wasn’t the only one with that sentiment. The whole team probably agreed on that, but they sent Sam to say it because they figured she would throw any other messenger off this bridge. Smart move.

She shook her head, “I can’t do that.”

Sam replied sternly, “Well he might not give you a choice. He doesn’t know you.”

Stephanie took a deep breath, remembering how for a brief moment during the fight, the Winter Soldier could’ve taken a shot, but he didn’t. Something stopped him, and she was willing to bet it was Bucky.

“He will.” She asserted, “Gear up, it’s time.”

“You gonna wear that?” Sam gestured to her sweat-soaked casual gear.

“No.” Stephanie walked along the bridge towards the Smithsonian, “If you’re going to fight a war, you need to wear a uniform.”
Mission of their Own

Stephanie was extremely tempted to take her favorite USO outfit from the museum, but the tactical uniform was what she needed. She was delighted to see it still fit in the right places; it looked like the Smithsonian did their homework when restoring it. It felt good to wear the red and white stripes again as she marched to the Triskelion on foot. She prayed that this was enough for Bucky to recognize her.

The first step was weeding out the ones following orders from the ones willing to take a stand. All she needed was access to the PA system. A sonic device from Natasha sent a painful screech through Tech’s Bluetooth earpieces, and the unlucky chump who opened the stairwell door got two guns aimed at his face while Captain America, in her traditional look, politely excused herself past him.

She didn’t know if they let her have the microphone because of her team or because they were faithful to her but it was nice not needing to hurt the dorky Tech crew.

“Attention all S.H.I.E.L.D agents, this is Stephanie Rogers…” She began, wanting to use her married last name, but knowing this wasn’t the time for it, “You’ve heard a lot about me over the last few days. Some of you were even ordered to hunt me down, but I think it’s time you knew the truth…”

She imagined the faces of everyone listening below her as she took a deep breath, preparing to shatter their world as hers was, “S.H.I.E.L.D is not what we thought it was. It’s been taken over by Hydra. Alexander Pierce is their leader. The STRIKE and INSIGHT crew are Hydra as well. We don’t know how many more, but I know they’re in the building. They could be standing right next to you. They almost have what they want, absolute control. They shot Nick Fury, and it won’t end there. If you launch those Helicarriers today, Hydra will be able to kill anyone who stands in their way, unless we stop them.”

“I know I’m asking a lot, but the price of freedom is high. It always has been…” Stephanie thought of the father she never met because he died in World War I. She thought Bucky had given his life, but he actually paid far more than that. Peggy and Howard spend theirs trying to protect people, and now she was undoing decades of their work to do the same, “…and it’s a price I’m willing to pay. And if I’m the only one, then so be it, but I’m willing to bet I’m not.”

“Did you write that down first?” Sam smiled, “Or was it off the top of your head?”

Stephanie didn’t expect to magically keep the Helicarriers from launching with one big speech, but she could tell it bought her some time. Agent Hill kept watch of their activity on the monitors. Black Widow was already in play posing as a member of the World Council. If she and Fury did their part, then Pierce wouldn’t be her concern. She and Falcon focused on switching the chips one, one ship at a time.

“Hey Cap, how do we know the good guys from the bad guys?” He asked as they ran towards the first one lifting off.

“If they’re shooting at you, they’re bad!” She told him before they split up, with Falcon taking the air and she working from the ground level. She quickly ran into a tac team and dodged their fire from behind their artillery. She used one guy’s grenade to take out the other three of them.
“Hey Cap, I found those bad guys you were talking about!” She heard over her communicator.

“Are you okay?”

“Not dead yet.”

She had a lot more goons coming her way, so she was glad to hear that Sam was having an easier time getting there. She had to keep charging and kick them out of her way.

“Eight minutes, Cap” Agent Hill reminded her.

“Working on it!” Stephanie was well aware of the rush. After she finished off the crew, she was able to replace the chip easily, “Alpha lock.”

Sam still hadn’t reported lock yet, so she got worried. Agent Hill asked for her, “Falcon, where are you now?”

“I had to take a detour!” He shouted. She could hear the gunfire in the background. Maybe he wasn’t having an easier time after all. If she had to, she could take Bravo down herself, but it would cost them precious time…

“I’m in!” Sam confirmed, “Bravo lock.”

Stephanie noted to herself never to doubt a team member again.

“Two down, one to go.” Agent Hill reported, “Charlie carrier’s 45 degrees off the port bow. Six minutes.”

“Hey Sam, I’m gonna need a ride!” Stephanie huffed into her walkie talkie as she was chased down by another set of Hydra’s faithful goons.

“Roger, let me know when you’re ready.”

“I just did!” Stephanie exclaimed as she leaped off the Helicarrier’s edge, feeling the intense rush of free fall for several seconds until she felt Sam’s strong grip on her arm slow her down to a quick stop before they ascended to the final carrier.

“You know, you’re a lot heavier than you look.” Sam said as soon as they landed.

“Didn’t your mama teach you never to comment on a lady’s weight?” Stephanie laughed, “Besides I had a big breakfast.”

Suddenly, the Winter Soldier appeared from behind the tall stacks of ammo and gave her a powerful kick to the chest which broke the rails behind her and sent her falling. It happened so quickly, she didn’t have time react.

“Steph!” She heard Sam call out for her, but he didn’t come flying down to catch her. He was too busy facing her lost husband alone. Luckily, she grabbed the edge of the engine wing and pulled herself back on the surface.

“Cap! Cap, come in, are you okay?” Sam panicked.

“Yeah, I’m here, I’m still on the Helicarrier.” She reported, “Where are you?”

“I’m grounded,” He said dejected, “The suit’s down. Sorry, Cap.”
“Don’t worry, I got it.” She reported, still optimistic that this would work. In a way, she was glad that Falcon wasn’t there for the last fight. Bucky was, and neither he nor she were going stop until they finished their mission. What she didn’t tell the rest of her team is that she took a page out of Natasha’s book and gave herself a separate mission.

She finally realized that she wasn’t just here to stop Hydra or be an Avenger. There were plenty of people who could do that without her. No, she was here to save Bucky, or die trying.
She ran to the belly of the Helicarrier, but he was there, waiting for her. She stood before him, dressed in her old uniform that he should know.

“People are going to die, Buck.” She addressed him as if nothing had changed between them, hoping it would get a response. Sadly, he stared right through her, like a machine.

“I can’t let that happen.” She wanted to cry when he still did nothing, but for once, she had run out of tears, “Please don’t make me do this.”

He ignored her pleas, her voice drowning under Pierce’s in his mind, commanding him to kill her. He waited for her to make the first move. When she realized there was no way to talk her way out of this, she took a deep breath and threw her shield. He blocked it with his metal arm, which sent it back to her before he took two shots at her. She knocked his arm out of the way, but the other was armed too, and one bullet managed to graze her side.

She grunted, the pain fueling her to knock the guns out of his hands and his whole body backwards with the shield. She knew he could take it, plus she could always apologize once they were back together. When he got back up, she heard the sharp shnk of his knife. As threatening as he looked, hand-to-hand combat was always her specialty. She blocked every punch and kick he threw at her. She managed to push him far enough to give her a few seconds to punch in the code to display the computer chips.

He came back throwing punches with his metal arm. She couldn’t take the force of that alone, so she had to maneuver it out of her way with the shield. When they got locked grasping each other’s arms, she snatched the knife out of his hands and kicked him back. She used the next few seconds to take out the original computer chip, but before she could pull the new one out of her belt, the metal arm came at her in a mighty punch, which clanged against her shield. She swung at him every which way with it until he blocked it with his arm. Once she was close enough, she punched his cheek hard with an audible crack.

He roared as he charged at her like a bull, throwing both of them over the railing. The chip flew out of her hand but she spotted it right on the edge of the curved platforms they fell on. With both of their weapons on the glass floor, they ran towards each other, punching and kicking when they could as they held each other tightly. His metal arm flew across her face, backhanding her. She yelped as she flew back spinning, but luckily she fell close enough to the computer chip to grab it. He slid down to meet her at the edge. He threw punches until he knocked the chip out of her hand and onto the glass beneath them. Once she was able to land a punch on his jaw, she kicked him over the edge and then dived after him.

She ran after the chip, but didn’t see him throw her own shield at her until she was already on the ground. She knew he had his guns back, so she kicked it up in time to roll into a ball and cover herself as he shot at her. She threw the shield at him, but he knocked it out of the way. She saw him grab the knife with the metal arm and knew this wasn’t going to be pretty. She grabbed both of his arms before he could stab her, but the metal arm whirred and gave him the strength to jam the knife in her shoulder.

She screamed and headbutted him until she could break free. As she pulled the blade out and threw it on the ground, she reminded herself that one day, when he was hers again, she was going to laugh about this. She looked back and saw him crawling for the chip, and he had just grabbed it by the time she ran up to him. As much as it broke her heart to do it, she grabbed his neck and held him in the air.
until he was turning colors. Still, he didn’t let go of the chip. She flipped him, and he hit the ground with a clang. She pushed down on his back while keeping a grip on his arm.

“Drop it!” She ordered as his other arm failed to grab onto her, “Drop it!”

Time was ticking, and the stakes were too high for her to keep playing nice. When he still didn’t release it, she dislocated his shoulder. He screamed, but still kept a tight grip. She fell back and took him with her, locking him in a chokehold, and holding him tightly as he struggled on top of her. His metal arm reached for hers, but she held it down with her leg. It took all of her strength to keep him in place, until his face went purple and he finally went limp.

As soon as the chip slipped out of his hands, she let go of him. She could still feel him breathing and his face went back to pink, which gave her a massive sense of relief. She rolled him off of her, but couldn’t help but brush the hair out of his face as she grabbed the chip. *Sleep well, my love,* she thought to herself before she rushed back up to the bridge.

She had only pulled herself up to the curved platform when a bullet hit her thigh. She fell for a moment, and looked down to see that Bucky was awake, armed, and angry. As she climbed up to the bridge, he shot her arm, which dangled in the air for a moment, but her adrenaline made her push through and pull herself up.

“30 seconds, Cap!” Maria Hill warned.

She crawled to the rows of chips, trying to avoid putting pressure on her injured limbs. She reached for the chip in her belt.

“Charlie…” She reached her arm out, but another shot fired. She felt her stomach burst in a burning pain and screamed as she fell on her knees, panting to work through it all. She looked down to see blood soaking the stripes on her abdomen. The stain was growing; she was losing blood too fast, but she couldn’t fail now. Millions of people were about to die. She pushed herself back on her knees and guided her shaking hand over the empty slot. She shoved the chip into place and groaned as she fell back to the ground.

“Charlie lock…” She heaved, pressing on her stomach.

“Okay Cap, get out of there.” Hill told her, obviously worried.

“Fire now.” Stephanie ordered. There was no way she could get out of here before someone noticed what they’d done. If they didn’t destroy them right away, the techs could reroute the targets and undo everything.

“But Stephanie-“

“Do it!” Stephanie barked. There was silence on the other line, and then the Helicarrier shook as it fell under fire. The world was going to be fine, now she had her other mission to take care of.

She looked over the railing and saw that some of the railing had fallen directly on Bucky, trapping him underneath. She threw herself to the bottom, too dizzy from blood loss to be careful with her fall. She wobbled over to him, breathless, but the rocking of the ship kept knocking her off her feet. It took a second wind to bring her back up, and she pulled on the metal railing lifting just high and long enough for Bucky to slip himself free. She could see his confusion in her saving him, so it was time for them to finally talk.

“You know me.” She choked out as she leaned on the railing for support.
“No, I don’t!” He screamed, punching her hard across the face. He couldn’t allow himself to fall for any tricks. There was a still a mission he had to finish.

“Bucky…” She said sternly, struggling back on her feet again, “…You’ve known me your whole life.”

He roared as his metal hand backhanded her cheek again. She yelped as the metal broke the bone and swelled her cheek. She didn’t care how long she had to do this. She wasn’t going back without him, not this time.

“Your name…is James Buchanan Barnes.” She panted, holding her shield over her already injured stomach.

“Shut UP!” He screamed as he punched her to the ground again. It had to be working. If it wasn’t, he’d be staring at her like a machine. He had to be feeling something. This time, she took her helmet off, letting her long blond hair fall along her back and shoulders. There was no more need for protection. She wasn’t afraid to die today.

“I’m not going to fight you.” She locked her knees to keep her standing, and dropped her shield into the river. She looked into his eyes and said, “You’re my husband.”

He stared at her, angry and confused. He lunged at her and tackled her along the edge of the collapsing glass floor,

“You’re my mission.”

Every punch he nailed in her face chipped away at her heart. She yelped, but she still did not cry. Her cheeks swelled until she couldn’t see in one eye, and her jaw was lined with green and purple bruises.

“Then finish it…” She muttered, and his raised fist hesitated. He stopped and only huffed for air as she lifted her hand up to caress his cheek and whispered with a smile, “…’cause I’m with you ‘til the end of the line.”

Something clicked. She could tell. He could break her nose with one more punch if he wanted, but he didn’t. He looked at her liked she had just shattered his whole world. Her hand on his cheek slipped to hook on the back of his neck as she struggled to lift her face close to his. One more kiss was all she wanted, but as her lips were about to reach his, the ground fell beneath them.

Bucky held onto the metal framing, but Stephanie fell into the water. Her muscles were too drained to move, and she could barely keep her eyes open as she sank. If she didn’t win him over, then dying was fine. At least she didn’t have to kill him. Just before she lost consciousness, she saw his metal arm reach for her.

The throbbing pain of her limbs and stomach woke her up in the hospital. Her arms were plugged with IVs, and she heard smooth music playing. Once her vision cleared, she saw someone plugged in their phone to a speaker next to her bed, and then she turned her head to see that someone nodding off in the visitor’s chair. She was truly touched to have someone like Sam. Even if nothing was going to happen between them romantically, he still stuck around to be her friend.

“On your left.” She murmured with a smile and closed her eyes to drift off to sleep again.
It only took her a few days to recuperate without even a scar to tell the tale. After being discharged from the hospital, she got a text from Natasha, telling them to meet her at Fury’s grave. First they had to get a new car for Sam, since nothing of his old one survived the highway.

For a man who wasn’t really dead, Fury got a very nice marble tombstone with a fresh batch of flowers on it. It would be a nice resting place when he really did die.

“So, you’ve experienced this sort of thing before.” Fury showed up with a leather jacket over a hoodie, and his eyepatch replaced with dark sunglasses.

“You get used to it.” Stephanie shrugged.

“We’ve been data mining Hydra’s files. Looks like a lot of rats didn’t go down with the ship.” Fury told her.

She nodded sternly. Of course it wasn’t over. It was never over.

“I’m headed to Europe tonight, wanted to ask if you’d come.”

She inhaled deeply, “There’s something I’ve got to do first.”

He understood right away, so he turned to Sam, “How about you, Wilson? Could use a man with your abilities.”

Sam looked at Stephanie, and knew he couldn’t let her do this alone, “I’m more of a soldier than a spy.”

“Alright, then.” Fury accepted their decisions and shook their hands as a goodbye, “If anybody asks for me, tell them they can find me right here. “

“You should be honored. That’s about as close as he gets to saying thank you.” Natasha walked up holding a thick file under her arm.

“No,” Natasha hid a small smile.

“Not staying here.”

“I blew all my covers. I gotta go figure out a new one.” Natasha explained.

“That might take a while.” Stephanie drooped. It would be tough not having her best girl friend around.

“I’m counting on it.” Nat handed the heavy strapped files to her, “That thing you asked for, called in a few favors from Kiev.”

Stephanie’s eyes watered as she held the history of the cruelty to her husband in her hands. She pulled Natasha in for a hug.

“Thank you.” Stephanie squeezed her tightly and kissed her cheek and then pulled away, “You’ve done so much for me.”

“Don’t worry about it.” Natasha turned to leave.

“I mean it. You tried so hard to get me a date, now I gotta do the same.” Stephanie smiled slyly,
“Call Dr. Banner. He’s very sweet once he opens up to you.”

Natasha contemplated it for a second and shrugged, “It’s worth a shot.”

Before she left, Natasha warned Stephanie seriously, looking at the file, “Be careful, Steph. You might not want to pull on that thread.”

Stephanie opened the file to see a large picture of Bucky pale as snow, sleeping in a chamber of ice. In the corner, was a small square picture of him as Sgt. Barnes, beautiful and pristine in his uniform. They knew who he was. Everyone who ever had this file knew that the Winter Soldier was Captain America’s husband. They knew using him against her would break her heart.

“You’re going after him.” Sam stood behind her, knowing he couldn’t talk her out of it.

“You don’t have to come with me.” She assured him. He’d done more than enough for her already.

“I know.” Sam tucked his hands into his jacket, “When do we start?”
Secret Plans

Over a year had passed since Stephanie started her hunt for Bucky, but every step forward took her two steps back. The files Natasha gave her just skimmed the surface of his story, but it was a decent start. Unfortunately, most of the facilities mentioned were long abandoned and the scientists involved were already dead. The few still living and functioning had nothing to offer. He had not gone back to them after Washington D.C, so they had no idea where he was now.

As far as Hydra was concerned, the Avengers had a bigger plan for them. According to their intel, Loki’s scepter was in their hands. As a team, they stormed every remaining base they could find, and while they were there, she and Natasha did some snooping to find any clues about Bucky.

Natasha was surprised when Stephanie decided to not tell the team about her husband. The big leak of Hydra and S.H.I.E.L.D’s intelligence spilled a lot of secrets, but the Winter Soldier files were harder to decrypt from the rest. Those who weren’t there in D.C still didn’t know the whole truth.

“They could help you, Stephanie. You don’t have to do this alone.” Natasha said as they rummaged through file drawers, genuinely concerned.

“They already have a lot on their plates right now. I don’t need to add to the pile.” Stephanie muttered. The rest of the Avengers were currently outside the base, occupied by a few dozen goons.

“You’re still a terrible liar,” Natasha gave a small smile, “This isn’t about protecting them. It’s about protecting him, isn’t it?”

Stephanie sighed, hesitating to say that she mistrusts anyone, but the silence only made it worse.

“If you can trust me of all people,” Natasha touched her shoulder, “why can’t you trust the rest of the team? I mean, you’re the leader, it’s sort of your job.”

Stephanie smiled sadly, “I know it seems hypocritical but, this just feels like one of those things that should be kept personal, low-key, you know? I want to get him back but I don’t want Hulk yanking him out of his hiding place or Tony immediately poking that metal arm and boasting about how he can make a better one.”

“I’m sure they can do their part without ambushing him.” Natasha retorted.

“Also, what if there’s someone on the team…who doesn’t think he can be saved…I can’t hear those words, not from them.” Stephanie pulled away, “Thank you, but Sam and I have this mission covered.”

“What if they run into him as the Winter Soldier? Shouldn’t they know who they’re really fighting?” Natasha asked.

“Well, that’s a different story. Until that day comes though, our lips are sealed, understood?” Stephanie used her authoritative voice. Frustrated with the lack of clues in this base, and with Natasha constantly badgering her about this, she threw her hands up and stormed out of the office.

“Yes, ma’am.” Natasha pursed her lips, “Captain Barnes.”

Stephanie turned around, inhaled sharply, and gave her a warning glare.
Their next mission was especially motivating for Stephanie. The target, Baron Wolfgang Von Strucker, not only developed weapons, but illegally performed enhancement experiments using human test subjects. Sometimes, she wished Erskine’s serum failed her and that Howard’s machine fried her to a crisp. At least then, so many people wouldn’t be sacrificed to make something like herself, but since she was already here, she might as well enjoy kicking his ass.

She rode her motorcycle through the Sokovian forests towards his isolated castle, while Black Widow and Hawkeye stole one of their Jeeps. Everyone else flew or leaped there. While Iron Man flew to the castle, the rest took care of the defense on the ground. She grabbed heads and took them for a ride against the snow, and then threw them against the trees. She threw her shield and knocked several guys over like bowling pins.

“Shit!” Tony exclaimed over the group com after he bounced right off the castle like a trampoline.

“Language.” Stephanie said sternly. If she wanted to hide her occupied mind from her team, she had to play the character they expected her to be. She had to be Captain America, the wholesome golden girl, for them, “J.A.R.V.I.S, what’s the view from upstairs?”

“The central building is protected by some kind of energy shield. Strucker’s technology is well beyond any other Hydra base we’ve taken.”

“Loki’s scepter must be here,” Thor concluded, “Strucker couldn’t mount this defense without it. At long last.”

“At long last is lasting a little long, boys.” Natasha said.

“Yeah, I think we’ve lost the element of surprise.” Clint added.

“Wait a second, no one else is going to deal with the fact that Cap said ‘Language’?” Tony said.

“I know.” Stephanie let them believe what they wanted as she flipped over her motorcycle and threw it directly into the incoming Jeep, “It just slipped out.”

While Tony took care of the shield, she and the rest of the team stood their ground against the bunkers. The field fell quiet. They snuck around the perimeter, keeping their eyes peeled for any motion in the trees. Suddenly, something whizzed past Clint and knocked him to his feet. The blur slowed down to walk past him again, revealing it was a young man. The youth boasted,

“You didn’t see that coming?”

When Clint tried to aim for him, he already took off, faster than anyone could see. Distracted, Clint didn’t see the bunker fire behind him, and took a hit in his side. Natasha called his name and ran to his side immediately, but before Stephanie could react to the gunfire, the blur ran past her shoulder, trying to knock her down. She spun in the air to land back on her feet. She had only caught a glimpse of the figure, enough to know that was a human.

“We have an Enhanced in the field,” Stephanie alerted the team, running to regroup with Natasha.

“Clint’s hit.” Natasha reported, “Somebody want to deal with that bunker?”

Hulk dealt with it swiftly, much to Nat’s appreciation.

“Stark, we really need to get inside!” Stephanie shouted.
“I’m closing in.” Tony reported, and then a minute later, “Drawbridge is down, people.”

Stephanie pulled her shield back to her by her magnetized wrist gear. She ran to regroup with Thor who asked her,

“The Enhanced?”

“He’s a blur,” she shook her head, “All the new players we’ve faced, I’ve never seen this. In fact, I still haven’t.”

“Clint’s hit pretty bad, guys.” Natasha warned them, “We’re going to need Evac.”

“I can get Barton to the jet. The sooner we leave, the better. You and Stark secure the scepter.” Thor laid out the plan.

“Copy that.” Stephanie nodded. She heard the rolling of tanks and saw a group of Strucker’s men run towards them.

“Looks like they’re lining up.” Thor swung his hammer around to power up.

“Well, they’re excited.” She sighed and bent her knees and held the shield in position. Thor banged on her shield, creating a sonic blast that knocked out the row of men in front of them and flipped the top of their tank clean off.

“Find the scepter!” Thor repeated before taking off.

“And for gosh sake, watch your language!” Tony mocked her.

Stephanie pursed her lips and grabbed her hips, “That’s not going away anytime soon.”

Stephanie always dreamed of storming a castle ever since she was a little girl. Of course, even her toddler imagination never dreamed that the treasure she was looking for would be the magical staff of a Norse god. At least that put some fun in this otherwise dreary, crumpling stone prison. There was probably a dungeon filled with rats and cobwebs around here somewhere, and poor Bucky might’ve spent some of his 70 years of Hell there.

“We’re locked down out here.” Natasha told her over the com.

“Then get to Banner. Time for a lullaby.” Stephanie ordered. If she weren’t too busy looking for Strucker, she would love to do it herself. She felt it should be her responsibility anyway, seeing as how Bruce was that way because of her. There was something fulfilling about looking into the big green beast’s eyes and watching them soften and turn back into Bruce’s dark brown eyes as their fingertips lightly slid past each other. Well, at least there was always the next Code Green.

She found her target strolling through the halls by the window, calm and guiltless.

“Baron Strucker,” Stephanie said the name like poison on her lips, “Hydra’s number one thug.”

“Technically, I’m a thug for S.H.I.E.L.D” He said smugly as he circled around her.

“Well then technically, you’re unemployed.” She spat back at him, “Where’s Loki’s scepter?”

“Don’t worry. I know when I’m beat.” He said, poorly feigning humility, “You’ll mention I
cooperated, I hope.”

“I’ll put it right under illegal human experimentation.” She smiled smugly right back at him, barely concealing her fury, but only for a second, “How many are there?”

Suddenly, a blast of energy threw her off her balance and down the flight of stairs, but it wasn’t from the blur. She looked up and saw a young woman—a girl, really—who stoically stared her down before retreating, shutting the doors behind her with only her mind.

“We have a second Enhanced. Female. Do not engage.” Stephanie warned as she ran back up the stairs, where Strucker still stood proudly.

“You’ll have to be faster than-“

She kicked her shield off the ground and into Strucker’s gut. He hit the wall so fast it knocked the glass out of his monocle and left him unconscious on the stone floor.

“Guys, I got Strucker.” She announced.

“Yeah…I got…something bigger.” Tony voice dropped off.

Tony located the hidden lab behind a secret door, and found several unfinished drones and project. The giant skeleton of a Chitauri Leviathan loomed over him, propped up with wires like a museum exhibit. He saw the scepter propped up on a table for display.

“Thor, I got eyes on the prize.” He said, not noticing the stoic girl waving her hands behind him, slipping her red energy through his ears, straight to his mind.

He heard a subtle growl behind him. When he turned around, the Leviathan carcass had come to life and flew over him, baying loudly into the night sky. He jolted backwards with a yell. His heart raced, but the view below him only made it race faster.

The castle walls lay in rubble at his feet, and bodies scattered the steps. The Hulk rested at the top, defeated and growling his last breath. Black Widow lay on the step below him, with empty glass eyes and skin as pale and still as a porcelain doll. Hawkeye’s body slumped against the rubble, soaked in blood with an arrow in his grip. Thor lay flat out, arms spread, eyes closed, with Mjolnir just within his reach. Cap…Cap’s shield was broken into two jagged pieces, right next to her lifeless body.

He ran to Stephanie. No, no, this wasn’t supposed to happen. Not to her, of all people. She’d been through worse, and her heart kept beating. She looked too peacefully asleep to be dead. He gently pressed his fingers on her neck for a pulse, and suddenly she gasped awake, clutching his wrist tightly.

“You could’ve…saved…us.” She choked out, tearfully looking at him.

I can save you. Please stay with me, his mind screamed, clutching onto the hope that she would pull through, even as her grip weakened. Finally, her neck lost its strength and fell to the side, and blood dripped from her nose as the life left her gaze. His own blood went cold.

Why didn’t you do more?
He held her body and took in the last of her warmth, and looked up at the sky. Hundreds of Leviathans swam through the air towards a wormhole that led them directly to Earth.

As quickly as he entered the vision, he escaped it, and saw nothing but the scepter in front of him. He slowly calmed his breathing as he tried to shake off the horrible fantasy, but the damage was already done. He took the scepter for his own.
Stephanie checked Clint’s IVs to make sure they were in place. It was good that he was conscious, but the most important thing was keeping his wound clean. Somewhere out there, there was an old poster or commercial of her saying “Infections kill faster than any bullet!”

Natasha joined her, making sure Clint was okay before they both went to comfort Bruce. Stephanie had given him a change of clothes, a blanket and his headphones with his calming music. She felt like he might want his personal space, but she couldn’t just ignore him. She quietly sat next to him and leaned on his shoulder while Natasha sat on his other side. Bruce took off his headphones for them.

“Hey, the lullaby worked better than ever.” Natasha assured him.

“Just wasn’t expecting a code green,” Dr. Banner mumbled, looking down like a shy teenager unsure of what to do with some much attention.

“If you hadn’t been there, it would’ve been double the casualties. My best friend would’ve been a treasured memory.” Natasha added. Stephanie nodded with her.

“You know, sometimes exactly what I want to hear isn’t exactly what I want to hear.” Bruce smiled weakly.

“How long before you trust us?” Stephanie asked in a quiet voice as she leaned closer. She knew the value of alone time, but she also knew the danger of shutting everyone out.

Bruce shook his head, “It’s not you guys I don’t trust.”


“The gates of Hel are filled with the screamed of his victims.” Thor boasted. Natasha and Stephanie both shot him dirty looks as Bruce groans and covered his face, with Stephanie wrapping an arm around his shoulder. That was clearly not the answer Bruce needed right now, so Thor tried to correct himself, “But not the screams of the dead, of course. No, no, wounded screams, mainly whimpering and, uh, a great dealing of complaining and tales of sprained deltoids and…gout.”

“Hey Banner,” Tony interrupted, “Dr. Cho’s on her way in from Seoul, is it okay if she sets up in your lab?”

“Uh, yeah, she knows her way around.” Bruce answered sluggishly, clearly exhausted. Stephanie could tell he really needed some sleep, so she left him and Natasha by themselves to look at what they’d recovered.

“Feels good, yeah? I mean, you’ve been after this thing since S.H.I.E.L.D collapsed, not that I haven’t enjoyed our little raiding parties, but…” Tony joined them.

“No, but this…this brings it to a close.” Thor nodded.

“As soon as we find out what else this has been used for, and I don’t just mean weapons. Since when is Strucker capable of human enhancement?” Stephanie asked. No more brushing over the little details. She had to know each and every little thing Hydra had done to innocent people. No one else was going to slip through the cracks with her around.
“Banner and I will give it the once over before it goes back to Asgard. That cool with you?” Tony waited for a nod from Thor, “Just a few days ‘til the farewell party. You’re staying right?”

“Yes, yes, of course. A victory should be honored with revels.” Thor said.

“Yeah, who doesn’t love revels?” Tony looked at Stephanie, “Captain?”

In the three years they’d known each other, Stephanie had received countless invitations to Tony’s parties. She attended none. The Star-Spangled Gal act was already exhausting for her during the work week, and she couldn’t get drunk, so how could she possibly relax at a crowded party full of people and their impossible expectations?

Still, this wasn’t just about her. It was a celebration of the whole team and their allies. Even the World War II veterans who gave them the smallest of tips that led them in the right direction were invited. She didn’t want to disappoint her fellow soldiers. Besides, now she had a reason to wear that dress still wrapped in the plastic.

“Hopefully this puts an end to the Chitauri and Hydra, so yes, revels.” She pushed out a smile.

As soon as the quinjet landed at Avengers Tower, Clint was rushed off in his stretcher by Dr. Cho’s team, with Natasha quickly following him. Stephanie stayed behind to handle Maria Hill.

“Lab’s all set up, boss.” She reported.

“Actually, she’s the boss.” Tony pointed to Steph, “I just pay for everything, and design everything and make everyone look cooler.”

“What’s the word on Strucker?” Stephanie asked her.

“NATO’s got him.”

“The two Enhanced?”

Hill handed her the IPad with footage of them protesting at local demonstrations, “Wanda and Pietro Maximoff, twins, orphaned at ten when a shell collapsed their apartment building.”

Stephanie’s eyes welled. As she watched these kids risking their safety to take a stand, she saw pieces of herself in them.

“Sokovia’s had a rough history. It’s not special, but it’s on the way to everywhere special.” Hill explained as they walked together.

“Their abilities?”

“He’s got enhanced metabolism and improved thermal homeostasis. Her thing is neuro-electric interfacing, telekinesis, mental manipulation...” Hill stopped when she saw the way Steph was looking at her. What she didn’t realize was that Steph wasn’t confused by the terms, but the phrase “mental manipulation” struck a cord that made her face go pale. Hill decided to rephrase the whole spiel, “He’s fast, and she’s weird.”

“Well, they’re going to show up again.” Stephanie noted. She really didn’t want to hurt these kids, but she wasn’t going to hold back a punch if they earned it.
“Agreed. Files said they volunteered for Strucker’s experiments. It’s nuts.” Hill said.

Stephanie sighed and entered the elevator. She remembered her own desperation when she was small and felt powerless, “Right. What kind of monster would let a German scientist experiment on them to protect their country?”

Maria Hill responded, “We’re not at war, Captain.”

Stephanie learned a long time ago that war and peace were not that simple.

“They are.”
The Party

Stephanie spent the days before the party researching Sokovian civil strife and rehearsing for Saturday’s party. She wasn’t singing or dancing, but even just talking to people expecting a charismatic bombshell took effort. No one wanted to hear her obsess over Bucky all night; even Sam and Natasha were at their limit. She jotted down fun memories to share, jokes, and made a note that she finally found out which *Sex and the City* character she was. She didn’t actually watch the show, but Natasha sent her a quiz, and her results said Charlotte. She also made sure to brush up on her political talk in case someone went there.

Curling her hair was a lot easier than it used to be; she didn’t even have to turn the iron on until a half hour before she planned to leave. She was lucky that 40’s fashion was still in style, so at least her dress wouldn’t stand out. It was new, but looked similar to something she saw Peggy wore on an undercover mission in Paris. The garnet red chiffon gown had off the shoulder sleeves that left the neckline flat. The rest was form fitting to her mid-thighs but gave her legs enough room to stretch. She went light on the eye shadow but colored her lips with thick matte plum. Getting dolled up always seemed to be a game for Natasha, picking the right look to manipulate a target. For Stephanie, on the other hand, as stressful as it could be, it was just relaxing to have some control over something in her life.

Before she went to the party, she picked up Sam from the airport. While she traveled with the Avengers in the spotlight, Sam had worked from the shadows. This would be his first night meeting half the team.

“Okay, I just got to say it. Damn.” Sam pulled off his shades when he saw her standing outside, leaning on her motorcycle in her party dress.

“Get on, we’re already late.” Stephanie smiled and threw him the spare helmet.

When they got there, the place was already packed. When the elevator opened up to the penthouse floor, the crowd around it cheered and whistled for her, which set off a wave of applause. She performed her Star-Spangled Gal smile and laugh, especially when she spotted the elderly World War II veterans scattered around.

“At last, the charming Daisy Buchanan finally arrives to one of Gatsby’s famous galas.” Tony announced proudly as he rushed to meet her, carrying two champagne glasses.

“You told them to do that, didn’t you?” Stephanie asked, half-serious, still smiling as she shyly pushed her hair behind her ear.

“I didn’t tell them anything, you just really know how to lead a team and then make an absolutely vexing entrance.” Tony handed Sam and her each a glass, “Sam Wilson, right?”

“Yes, sir.” Sam held his hand out to shake, which Tony took immediately, “Pleasure to meet you, Mr. Stark.”

“Just Tony’s fine. It’s a shame we haven’t met sooner. I saw the footage of DC, and I must say, those wings are impressive, for their time.”

“Tony.” Stephanie warned with pursed lips.
“It’s cool, Steph.” Sam patted her shoulder, “I can bring you what’s left of them if you want to take a closer look.”

“Awesome, drop by anytime.” Tony clapped his hands together, and made a steeple under his chin as he looked at the two of them together, and then looking directly at Steph, like he had some words for her. Sam took this as his cue to give them a chance to talk.

“If anyone wants to get their ass handed to them at pool, they can find me at the pool table.” Sam sipped his champagne and left Stephanie’s side.

After a small awkward silence, Tony just said, “Glad you could make it.”

“Thanks,” Stephanie politely responded, “I really needed a night off.”

“I’m really surprised you didn’t come to my Fourth of July bash last year. I sent you, like, what, ten invitations?”

“I know, but it was also my birthday, so I didn’t want to upstage you at your own party with my birthday.” Stephanie shrugged.

“I’m aware it was your birthday, that’s why it was a surprise birthday party…for you.” Tony tucked his hand into his pocket, and looked down at his feet for a moment.

Stephanie widened her eyes and covered her silent gasp, “Oh no…I’m so sorry.”

“No, it’s fine really, should’ve made it clearer in the e-mail.” Tony waved his hand.

“Oh, you should’ve told me! That’s so embarrassing!” Stephanie pressed her hand to her cheek.

“And what, spoil the surprise? It’s fine, everyone had a good time anyway. A lot of people have Captain America themed Fourth of July parties, so nothing looked out of place.”

“I have to make it up to you. What holiday falls on your birthday?” Stephanie bit her lip.

“National Paper Clip Day.” Tony quickly answered, having googled it himself years ago.

“Alright, well I will definitely…” Stephanie laughed at the idea, “throw a…Paper Clip party for you?”

“Thank you.” Tony said, “I will be sure not to attend.”

“Ah…” Stephanie hissed, “I am going to miss that silver tongue of yours.”

“You know, just because we’re done looking for the scepter doesn’t mean you can’t visit us anymore. I know he doesn’t act like it, but having you and Romanoff around really brightens Banner’s day.” Tony said.

“Brightens his day?” Stephanie shook her head, “Projection really suits you, Tony.”

“Me? I’m not projecting. You’re the one who’s projecting.” He countered, making them both laugh and then stand in silence.

Tony just inhaled sharply before asking what he’d been waiting to ask, “So is he your-“

“Partner,” Stephanie clarified, “Sam is my fighting partner. Like you and Rhodey.”
“Well, I don’t want to be the one who makes it awkward, but…” Tony hissed, “I think he’s got the hots for you.”

Stephanie kept smiling, “I know. We went out once, but things just…got complicated, so…partners. That’s all we are.”

“Good.” Tony nodded to himself, “Well, go on and loosen up, Cap. Thor brought his special stuff that’ll make even you tipsy.”

Stephanie joined Sam at the pool table, where she beat him 3 out of 5 rounds, although the last match was a very tense sudden death. Afterwards, they took a walk to a less crowded part of the party.

“Sounds like a hell of a fight,” Sam said, holding his second drink of the night as Stephanie told him about the last mission, “Sorry I missed it.”

“If I had known it was going to be a firefight, I absolutely would have called.” She said. It would’ve been handy to have Sam there. Maybe they wouldn’t have needed the Code Green.

“No, no, I’m not actually sorry,” Sam smiled, “I’m just trying to sound tough. I’m very happy chasing cold leads on our missing persons case.”

Stephanie’s mood dropped, but her party smile didn’t. Cold leads? Were they really that bad at this?

“Avenging is your world.” Sam continued, looking over the balcony to see the many party guests of all kinds of organizations, “Your world is crazy.”

“Be it ever so humble.” Stephanie joined him in the view.

“You find a place in Brooklyn yet?” Sam asked.

“I don’t think I can afford a place in Brooklyn.” Stephanie said. He knew what she really meant. The Brooklyn today wasn’t the Brooklyn she knew, but then again, nothing was.

“Well, home is home, you know?” Sam said.

Stephanie went still. She tried to stop thinking about him for this one night, she really did, but that one comment sent her running straight to Thor in hopes that what Tony said about his “special stuff” was true.

“This was aged for a thousand years in the barrels built from the wreck of Grunhel’s fleet.” Thor handed Stephanie a glass of brandy with a few drops of mead, “It is not meant for mortal men.”

I am no man. She thought to herself as she steadily sipped her drink.

“Neither was Omaha beach, Blondie. Stop trying to scare us. C’mon.” An elderly veteran gestured for a drink.

Thor looked at Stephanie first, seeing as how she technically invited this one. He was one of Hydra’s many American prisoners somewhere in Europe during the war, and the self-proclaimed president of her fan club in ’44, so she figured he at least earned the chance to try it.
Within fifteen minutes, the whole table was wasted, including her. She practically moaned when she felt the sweet numbness she’d been denied for years. When she tried to walk in her heels, she fell right into a veteran’s lap, making his life-long dream come true. The music and laughter around her sounded so distant, and her vision blurred the lights and colors. She crawled and felt around for the bar until she could grip it tight enough to stand herself up again. She mustered the strength to jump up and take a seat right on the bar, taking in the blissful cacophony of slurred wolf whistling.

Even after an hour, she had only slightly come back to Earth, enough to walk around without tripping on her own feet. She came up to Natasha’s side of the bar just in time to see her gazing into Dr. Banner’s sweet brown eyes. She wasn’t about to ruin their moment, so she waited until Natasha walked away on her own.

“It’s nice.” Stephanie grinned, still needing to lean on the bar for support.

“Wha-What is?” Bruce stammered, startled by Stephanie’s sudden appearance and finally noticing her dress up close.

“You and Romanoff.” She took some credit for making the match.

“No, we haven’t…that wasn’t…” Bruce muttered.

“It’s okay,” Stephanie held out her hand, “Nobody’s breaking any by-laws. It’s just she’s not the most…open person in the world, but with you she seems very relaxed.”

“No. Natasha…she’s just…she likes to flirt.” Bruce brushed it off, since he knew they didn’t call her the Black Widow for nothing.

“I’ve seen her flirt, up close.” Stephanie asserted as she grabbed a beer from behind the counter, planning to take it to Thor to get a few more drops of mead, “This ain’t that.”

She stumbled over to Bruce, leaning on his chest, which surprised and confused him into a blush, “As the leading authority on accepting loneliness…” She brought her lips close to his ear and whispered, “Don’t. You both deserve a win.”

She pushed herself off of him, slowly trying to keep her balance as she walked away.

“What do you mean ‘up close?’” Bruce asked, still flustered.

Stephanie turned around and genuinely laughed for the first time all night, “You’re so cute, Banner. You should’ve asked me out when you had the chance.”
By one in the morning, all of the guests had gone home except for the Avengers themselves, Dr. Cho, Rhodey, and Agent Hill, although the reason Dr. Cho hadn’t left was because she fell asleep on the couch. Every still conscious gathered around the living area for a more intimate after party.

“But it’s a trick!” Clint slurred his words while expertly spinning a drumstick between two fingers.

“No, no, it’s much more than that.” Thor heartily chuckled, passing Stephanie back the action figure she showed him. It was a small Star-Spangled Gal figure that she found in the bathroom for some reason, too new to be a vintage collectible. Who left that there?

“Whosoever be he worthy shall haveth the power, “ Clint mocked, “Whatever, man! It’s a trick!”

“Please, be my guest.” Thor gestured to Mjolnir resting on the coffee table.

“Really?” Clint waited, and the room went quiet. No one had as much as touched the hammer before, seeing as how Thor was quite possessive of it.

“Yeah.” Thor smiled in all seriousness.

Clint set the drumsticks down and rubbed his hands together in excitement.

“This is going to be beautiful.” Rhodey sneered.

“Clint, you’ve had a tough week. We won’t hold it against you if you can’t get it up.” Tony said, earning a small round of laughter from everyone, Stephanie included.

Clint looked straight at Thor, “You know I’ve seen this before, right?”

He tugged firmly with one arm but it didn’t even budge. In his strained laughter he said, “I still don’t know how you do it!”

“Smell the silent judgment?” Tony commented.

“Please, Stark. By all means…” Clint surrendered the moment to him.

Tony proudly stood and opened the jacket on his suit, “Never one to shrink from an honest challenge.”

He slipped his hand through the leather sheath and gripped tightly, “It’s physics,” but before he got started, he asked, “So if I lift it, I then rule Asgard?”

“Yes, of course.” Thor answered confidently.

“I will be reinstituting *Prima Nocte.*” Tony asserted before holding his foot on the table for support and pulling with both hands before he grunted in defeat, “…Be right back.”

He tried again with the gauntlet of his Iron Man suit, blowing the jets at full power, but still nothing. He recruited Rhodey to help him with the promise of a place in Tony’s royal court.

“Are you even pulling?” Rhodey grunted.

“Are you on my team?”
“Just represent, pull!”

Bruce gave it a shot after them. He pulled with all his might, and pretended like he was about to Hulk out. No one bought it, seeing as they knew real anger when they saw it.

When it was Stephanie’s turn, there was a buzz of encouragement and cheering for her.

“Go ahead, Steph, no pressure.” Tony said.

She cracked her knuckles, anticipating a test of will, since Tony’s gear proved it wasn’t a test of strength. Not even Stephanie’s enemies would speak against the strength of her will. She pulled as hard as she could, testing the muscles in her arms and chest. She heard the metal scrape the table as it barely wiggled, farther than anyone else has made it move so far. That was all she could do, though. She pulled again, but it didn’t come off the table. She smiled and shrugged to the rest of the group, ready to admit that some things were even outside her abilities.

“Haha, nothing.” Thor chuckled as he took another sip of his drink.

As Stephanie returned to her seat, everyone looked at Natasha, the last one.

“Oh no no. That’s not a question I need answered.” Natasha smiled coyly. Well that just wasn’t fair. If Stephanie knew you could back out of it, she wouldn’t have given everyone that view of her chest pushed together as she pulled.

“All deference to the Man Who Wouldn’t Be King, but it’s rigged.” Tony asserted.

“You bet your ass.” Clint patted him on the shoulder.

“Mom! He said a bad language word.” Agent Hill tattled.

Stephanie sighed, “Did you tell everyone about that?”

“The handle’s imprinted right?” Tony ignored her, “Right, like a security code? ‘Whosoever is carrying Thor’s fingerprints’ is, I think, the literal translation.”

“Yes, well, that’s a very very interesting theory, but I have a simpler one,” Thor plucked Mjolnir off the table with ease, “You are all not worthy.”

Everyone broke into boos and laughter, but their merriment was cut short by a high-pitched ringing like feedback from a microphone. The hair on the back of their necks stood at attention as they turned to the clunking metal robot shambling into the room like a zombie. The room turned deadly silent.

“No…” the wobbling shell of one of Tony’s Iron Legion croaked, “…how could you be worthy? You’re all killers.”

“Stark…” Stephanie wanted an explanation.

“J.A.R.V.I.S…” Tony called for help.

“Sorry, I was asleep…or I was a dream.” The robot creaked as it turned its head like a puppet.

“Reboot Legionnaire OS, we got a buggy suit.” Tony quietly commanded his phone.

“There was this terrible noise, and I was tangled in…in strings. Had to kill the other guy…He was a good guy…”
“You killed someone?” Stephanie asked gently but sternly, trying to not to set it off.

“Woulnd’t have been my first call, but down in the real world, we’re faced with ugly choices.” The robot moved with almost human-like gestures, which unsettled everyone even more.

“Who sent you?” Thor asked.

Rather than a name, the robot played a voice. Tony’s voice saying, “I see a suit of armor around the world.”

“Ultron.” Bruce said, looking straight at Tony, who was silent, like he’d be caught. These two knew this thing?

“In the flesh.” The robot picked up its head, “Or no, not yet. Not this…chrysalis. But I’m ready. I’m on a mission.”

“What mission?”

“Peace in our time.”

Two more rogue Legionnaires burst through the wall. Stephanie saw them headed straight for her, so she kicked up the coffee table to shield her, but they still hit hard enough to knock her on the ground. She stayed down while the bots were flying above her, and heard everyone scatter. Someone shouted Rhodey’s name, which meant he must’ve been hit. She stood back on her heels when she saw one’s back faced to her, and leaped up to wrap herself around it in mid-air, punching the circuits in its neck. Suddenly, its front jets roared and backed her into the wall, breaking the tiles. The impact made her lose her grip, and when it pulled out, it dropped her on the glass-covered floor.

“Stark!” she called out, both out of anger and desperation for him to fix this.

“One sec, one sec, I got this!” Tony exclaimed as he tried to shut one down manually.

She turned her head to see the torso of one corning a terrified Dr. Cho behind the piano. She immediately jumped back up and grabbed it, throwing it to Thor for him to smash.

“Cap!” Clint shouted as he tossed Steph her shield. She kept the momentum going by throwing it right at another bot, splitting it in half. The room went silent as the attack finally ended.

“That was dramatic.” The original shell continued, “I’m sorry, I know you mean well. You just didn’t think it through.”

Steph was tired of listening to this thing and marched toward it.

“You want to protect the world, but you don’t want it to change. How is humanity saved if it’s not allowed to…evolve?” The last standing robot grabbed the head of another and crushed it, “With these? These puppets? There’s only one path to peace…the Avenger’s extinction.”

Thor threw Mjolnir, smashing it to pieces, but it continued to make noise, singing in a static-y voice,

“I had strings…but now I’m free…there are no strings on me…”

It finally fell silent as oil spilled from its head and the lights in its eyes flickered out. Stephanie turned to Tony furiously.
“All our work is gone.” Bruce said as he checked every computer in the lab, “Ultron cleared out. He used the internet as an escape hatch.”

The whole team gathered there for answers, waiting for Tony to stop staring at his broken Legionnaire.

“Ultron…” Stephanie muttered under her breath with crossed arms. Not only did they create this thing, they gave it the most obviously malicious name they could think of.

“He’s been in everything. Files, surveillance. Probably knows more about us than we know about each other.” Natasha had taken the time to change out of her cocktail dress, but Stephanie didn’t bring a set of sweats, and she sure as hell wasn’t going to borrow from Tony’s closet at a time like this.

“He’s in your files, he’s in the internet,” Rhodey warned while nursing his injured arm, “What if he decides to access something a little more exciting?”

“Nukes?” Agent Hill thought of the most dangerous thing first just before Rhodey could say it.

“Nuclear codes.” Natasha specified.

“He didn’t say ‘dead.’ He said ‘extinct.’” Stephanie corrected.

“He also said he killed somebody.” Clint said.

“There wasn’t anyone else in the building.” Hill said.

“Yes there was.” Tony said solemnly as he put J.A.R.V.I.S’s interface on display…or what was left of it. The once bright and beating holographic presence was now shattered and glitching.

Stephanie looked down mournfully, “J.A.R.V.I.S was the first line of defense. He would have shut Ultron down. It makes sense.”

“No, Ultron could have assimilated J.A.R.V.I.S. This isn’t strategy, this is…” Bruce concluded, “…rage.”

Thor marched up to Tony and lifted him by the throat.

“Woah, woah, woah!” Stephanie got closer to them as she had to keep the team calm for all their sakes. If they all gave into their anger right now, nothing would save them.

“Hey, hey, use your words, buddy.” Tony choked out as he struggled for air.

“I have more than enough words to describe you, Stark.” Thor growled as he tightened his grip.

“Thor!” Stephanie snapped him out of it to remind him of the task at hand, “The Legionnaire.”

He set Tony down but still looked at him harshly as he reported, “Trail went cold about 100 miles out, but it’s headed north, and it has the scepter. Now we have to retrieve it, again.”
“Genie’s out of that bottle. Clear and present is Ultron.”

“I don’t understand,” Dr. Cho said as turned to Tony and Bruce, “You built this program. Why is it trying to kill us?”

Tony didn’t face anyone. He was silent, until he started laughing quietly, and then more loudly. Bruce gave him a reprimanding shake of the head, but Tony didn’t stop.

“You think this is funny?” Thor asked.

“No,” Tony answered in a high, almost child-like voice, “It’s probably not, right? This is very terrible? Is it so…? It is. It is so terrible.”

The team looked at him like he finally lost his last marble.

“This could’ve been avoided if you hadn’t played with something you don’t understand.” Thor tried to be more reasonable.

“No. I’m sorry. I’m sorry, it is funny.” Tony confronted him defensively, “It’s a hoot that you don’t get why we need this!”

“Tony, maybe this might not be the time…” Bruce quietly interrupted his manic breakdown.

“Really?! That’s it? You just roll over, show your belly every time somebody snarls?” Tony snapped.

“Only when I’ve created a murder bot.” Bruce snapped back.

“We didn’t! We weren’t even close. Were we close to an interface?” Tony asked. Bruce shrugged his head. 76 trials made something, apparently.

“Well you did something right, and you did it right here.” Stephanie said, disappointed in both of them, “The Avengers were supposed to be different from S.H.I.E.L.D.”

“Anyone remember when I carried a nuke through a wormhole?” Tony’s explanation got more desperate, “Saved New York? Recall that?”

“Nope, it’s never come up,” Rhodey shook his head, “Never heard that.”

“A hostile alien army came charging through a hole in space. We’re standing 300 feet below it.” Tony got quieter, “We’re the Avengers. We can bust arms dealers all the livelong day, but that up there, that’s…that’s the endgame. How were you guys planning on beating that?”

Stephanie looked at him the same way she looked at all of her friends who made dangerous choices based on fear, with sad compassion. She wished she could say she was surprised this happened, and she was surprised that Bruce took part in it, but she understood how Tony could build something like this. He was Howard’s son after all. Still, he had to realize that you couldn’t lose faith of the strength of people.

“Together.”

“We’ll lose.” Tony said calmly.

Stephanie looked at his genuinely fearful eyes. Tony really wanted to save the world by any means necessary, but Stephanie decided a long time ago that dying with you freedoms was better than living under total surveillance.
“Then we’ll do that together, too.” Stephanie told him before laying out the plan, “Thor’s right. Ultron’s calling us out, and I’d like to find him before he’s ready for us. The world’s a big place. Let’s start making it smaller.”
“He’s all over the globe, robotics labs, weapons facilities, jet propulsion labs. Reports of a metal man, or men, coming in and emptying the place.” Agent Hill updated the Captain as they returned to their headquarters.

“Fatalities?” Steph asked.

“Only when engaged. Mostly guys in a fugue state going on about old memories, worst fears, and something too fast to see.”

“Maximoffs.” Stephanie knew right away. She hadn’t seen the full extent of the girl’s powers, but it sounded like if she met her face to face, Stephanie would be at a disadvantage, “Well, that makes sense he’d go to them, they have someone in common.”

“Not anymore.” Hill handed her the tablet with the security feed of Strucker dead in his cell, with his blood used to write the word “Peace” on the wall, and a metal form lingering on the edge of the frame. Steph swelled with mixed feelings. On the one hand, Strucker committed horrible crimes and the world would be better off without him. On the other hand, murdering him in his cell wasn’t justice, especially when there was so much information about Hydra and other criminals that they could’ve gotten out of him.

Once they reached the top, she saw Clint on the phone, “Barton. We might have something.”

From the way it ended, the call sounded personal, so she asked him, “Who was that?”

Clint shrugged, “Girlfriend.”

Stephanie learned something new about her teammates every day. First Bruce and Tony made artificial intelligence, and now Clint had a girlfriend he never mentioned before.

When they joined the rest of the team in the lab, Stephanie handed the tablet to Thor who passed it around from there.

“What’s this?” Tony asked.


“And he did a Banksy at the crime scene, just for us.” Tony said, half-joking and half disturbed by Ultron’s propensity for creative thinking.

“This is a smoke screen. Why send a message when you’ve just given a speech?” Natasha asked.

“Strucker knew something that Ultron wanted us to miss.” Stephanie said.

“Yeah, I bet he…” Natasha checked the computers, “Yeah, everything we had on Strucker’s been erased.”

“Not everything.” Tony said.

Stephanie was actually pleased to work with paper files again. She hadn’t realized until now how much she missed the smell of manila paper and ink. Most of these files were Howard’s which Tony kept in storage. She brought in box after box of profiles for the team to dig through. After finding nothing useful from Strucker’s own history, they looked for good tangents.
“Known associates…” Tony mumbled and he fingered through hundreds of cardboard dividers.

“Baron Strucker had a lot of friends.” Stephanie sighed as she discarded a whole box filled with only information on his wives, lovers, and many, many children.

“Well these people are all horrible.” Bruce added as he opened a new profile.

“Wait.” Tony stopped him and took the file on Ulysses Klaue from him, “I know that guy. From back in the day. He operates off the African coast, black market arms.”

Stephanie stared at him with judging eyes.

“There are conventions, all right? You meet people. I didn’t sell him anything.” Tony explained, “He was talking about finding something new, a game-changer. It was all very Ahab.”

Thor looked at the photo himself and pointed out the marking on his neck, “This?”

“Oh, that’s a tattoo; I don’t think he had it.”

“No, those are tattoos, this is a brand.” Thor placed his finger on the red markings right under his hairline.

Bruce scanned his online file and translated the brand, “It’s a word in a dialect of Xhosa meaning thief…in a much less friendly way.”

“What dialect?” Stephanie asked.

“Waka-Wakanada…” Bruce had to adjust his glasses, “…Wakanda.”

Tony and Stephanie looked at each other.

“If this guy got out of Wakanda with some of their trade goods…” Tony whispered.

“I thought your father said he got the last of it.” Stephanie said in shock.

“I don’t follow, what comes out of Wakanda?” Bruce joined them.

Stephanie looked at her shield while Tony replied, “The strongest metal on earth.”

Stephanie got a plan ready in her head as she asked, “Where is this guy now?”

Tony tracked Klaue’s operations to a shipyard off the African coast. Bruce stayed in the quinjet on shore while Natasha and Clint snuck inside and looked for the command station. They called in the rest on the comms when they saw the large metal man himself already conversing with Klaue. The argument turned ugly when Ultron’s arm grew red hot and sliced Klaue’s left arm right off and cauterized it immediately. As he kicked the human man down the stairs, he exclaimed,

“Don’t compare with Stark! It’s a thing with me. Stark is…he’s a sickness!”

“Oh junior,” Tony flew down to confront him with Thor and Stephanie, “You’re going to break your old man’s heart.”

Ultron calmed down and walked towards them, with the Maximoff’s standing in his shadow, “If I
“Nobody has to break anything.” Thor said as Natasha and Clint stayed hidden.

“Clearly, you’ve never made an omelet.” Ultron retorted.

“…He beat me by one second.” Tony muttered.

“Ah, this is funny, Mr. Stark,” the boy, Pietro, walked closer and looked around at the surrounding missiles and bombs, “It’s what? Comfortable? Like old times?”

“This was never my life.” Tony said hoarsely.

“You two can still walk away from this.” Stephanie spoke to them directly. She read their story; she knew they were better than this.

“Oh, we will.” Wanda, the sister, said smugly.

“I know you’ve suffered.” She said kindly. She knew that angry young people could be misguided, but that didn’t mean she should give up on them.

Ultron laughed condescendingly, “Captain America. God’s righteous woman, pretending you could live without your…soldier.”

Stephanie froze. Ultron knew about Bucky. If he wanted, he could tell the whole team her secret right now, and then, she feared, she’d never earn their respect back.

“I can’t physically throw up in my mouth, but-” Ultron continued, but thankfully Thor cut him off.

“If you believe in peace, then let us keep it.”

“I think you’re confusing peace with quiet.” Ultron said.

“Uh huh, what’s the vibranium for?” Tony asked outright.

“I’m glad you asked that because I wanted to take this time to explain my evil plan.” Ultron said before he activated a strong electromagnet in his palm and pulled Tony’s whole suit towards him while two more of Ultron’s bodies attacked Thor and Cap simultaneously.

While Tony traded blows with the prime Ultron, Steph blocked her bot’s attacks until it grabbed her by the throat and pushed her against the rail. She was able to kick it off of her and knock it down with her shield, but when she ran towards Wanda, the girl shot a red energy blast with her bare hands. Stephanie fell backwards, which gave Wanda time to escape.

When Stephanie got back up, she focused on helping Thor take down the other robot, throwing her shield at it when she could. In the time it took her shield to come back to her, the speedster flew past her and socked her right on the chin. Okay, good will aside, now she was pissed. Hanging onto her shield this time, she leaped at the robot and lodged it under its neck, trapping it in a hold. Thor decapitated it with one mighty swing. She jumped down and spun around to throw it at Klaue’s reinforcements coming towards her, knocking them down like bowling pins.

She found Pietro struggling back on his feet in a stack of weapons cases. She knocked him back down with the face of the shield and stood over him.

“Stay down, kid.” She ordered, seeing him look up at her with the nervous eyes of a teenager.
“Thor, status.” She demanded as she saw her teammate walk down the pathway.

“The girl tried to warp my mind. Take special care, I doubt a human could keep her at bay. Fortunately, I am mighty.” Thor said, but suddenly stopped and grew quiet.

More henchmen approached her, so she plowed through them and knocked them into the surrounding boxes. Suddenly, the quick flash of silver flew into her stomach and threw her against the staircase. Her back hit the concrete, making her grunt painfully. Pietro looked at her defiantly, but not maliciously.

Wanda stood at the bottom of the staircase, and with a flick of her wrist, sent a burst of red energy crawling into her mind.
Stephanie felt woozy when she stood on her feet. Her head was reeling so badly that she took off her helmet and dropped it. Her legs staggered with the weight of lead pipes. Her vision blurred with every blink. Her mind slipped into a dream even with her eyes wide open. She collapsed.

The Stork Club filled the house with offers of an open bar to all veterans. Stephanie walked past the olive green uniforms seated at the tables with their brightly colored dames. The swing band played as loudly as they needed to compete with the chatter. Cameras flashed loudly like firecrackers. Men who fought for freedom were now fighting each other for a dance with the same girl. Wine replaced the blood on their jackets. The dance floor covered in rhythmic bodies, with just enough room for a few more.

“Hey Steph, you still up for dancing?”

Stephanie turned around when she heard the warm voice she’d been longing for. There she saw Bucky in his neatly pressed uniform, now with the Lieutenant rank on the sleeves. Right next to him was Peggy in a beautiful blue dress with a flower pin. Her hair was neatly curled and pinned back in rolls. Bucky’s was smoothed out neatly. Stephanie hesitated. She tried to remember how she got here, until they smiled at her, and then suddenly she didn’t care anymore.

“There you are! I was looking all over for you guys!” Stephanie beamed as she grabbed them each by the hand.

“Well someone here insisted on getting another round before stumbling out there.” Peggy said.

Bucky scoffed, “Yeah, that someone being you.”

“I hoped you saved one for me, at least.” Stephanie looked at the both of them.

“I was going to but…” Bucky shrugged, “What’s the point if you can’t get drunk?”

“You jerk!” Stephanie playfully shoved him. As her hand touched his shoulder, he grabbed it and led her to the dance floor.

“C’mon, they’re playing our song.” He said as he put her hand on her hip as the music slowed down. Everything slowed down for them. He clutched her hand tightly in his. Two or three songs went by with her pressed close to his chest as their feet moved together. He twirled her around and finally let go, but her hand was instantly taken once more, this time by Peggy.

“Mind if I cut in?” Peggy asked politely.

Stephanie just laughed and put her hand on Peggy’s hip, taking the lead, “You look beautiful.”

“Thank you, so do you.” Peggy smiled as she swayed with her.

Stephanie’s smile faded a little, and she murmured, “What happens now?”

“The war’s over, Stephanie. We can go home.” Peggy said softly.

“Back to England.” Stephanie said sadly.
Peggy laughed, “I wasn’t going to announce this until later, but…I got a transfer, a permanent job with the New York branch of the SSR.”

Stephanie lit up and hugged her tightly, “That’s wonderful! Congratulations!”

“It’ll be wonderful when I can secure a nice apartment for myself, hopefully one without a nosy roommate.” Peggy said.

Stephanie squeezed her shoulders tightly, “No, you’re not getting an apartment. You’re moving in with me and Bucky.”

“Oh no, I couldn’t possibly impose-“

“You won’t be imposing.” Stephanie touched her cheek lightly, “I can’t imagine anything better.”

Clint got worried when none of his teammates were responding on the comm. He looked around and saw Thor frozen in place, barely responsive. He found Black Widow sitting on the stairs, looking into nothing.

“Natasha, I could really use a lullaby.” Tony tuned in on the comm.

Clint held Natasha’s head up, and looked into her glassy eyes, “That’s not going to happen, not for a while.”

“Okay then, Plan B. Cap, you’re the understudy.” Tony said.

“I’m sorry, Tony.” Clint said as he looked down at Stephanie draped across the ground, “The whole team is down. You got no backup here.”

Tony paused, not allowing himself to panic, “I’m calling in Veronica.”

The cameras flashed as Peggy kissed her groom. As the matron of honor, Stephanie applauded her and the new Mr. Peggy Carter, previously known as Agent Daniel Sousa. He was a handsome man, but more importantly, he was a good man. He knew what it meant to sacrifice, as demonstrated by his prosthetic leg.

Stephanie watched proudly as her best friend had her first dance with her new husband. She was going to take good care of him, she just knew it.

“I want to hold her!” The brunette little boy exclaimed as he sat on the footstool that matched the rocking chair.

“Alright, but be sure to hold her head up, Ian. She’s very delicate.” Stephanie instructed as she gently placed her infant daughter into her four-year-old son’s arms. His mouth made a small “o” in amazement when she wiggled in his lap, and he laughed when her little hands reached for his nose.

“What are you going to name her?” Ian asked.
“Well her first name is going to be Margaret, after your aunt.” Stephanie explained.

Ian looked confused, “I don’t have an Aunt Margaret.”

“Peggy is short for Margaret.” Bucky chimed in, leaning against the door frame with a satisfied smile.

“So are we going to call the baby Peggy too?” Ian asked.

“Oh no, there’s only one Peggy,” Stephanie smiled, “I was thinking Margie.”

“You can call her Margie, I’m calling her Madge.” Bucky insisted.

“Well, I know what I’m calling her. Stinky.” Ian curled his nose as a foul odor rose from his sister’s diaper. Stephanie and Bucky laughed.

“I never meant for my weapons to get in the wrong hands. I had no choice. Schmidt would have killed me if I refused.” Doctor Zola pleaded, with his hands handcuffed to the table.

“Do you have any idea how many times I’ve heard that excuse today?” Stephanie reviewed his paperwork on the other end of the table.

“This is outrageous. I have already been cleared for Operation: Paperclip by the SSR, the very organization who made you! You of all people know the value of giving someone a second chance.” Zola continued.

“The SSR is officially defunct.” Stephanie explained, “All of their projects are currently being re-evaluated and reorganized under S.H.I.E.L.D regulations, including Operation: Paperclip’s system of integrating Nazi scientists into the American intelligence networks. For obvious reasons, our staff has decided that you don’t make the cut and the government now refuses to pardon you for your crimes.”

“Your arrogance blinds you, Captain Barnes. You are wasting a gifted mind over a petty personal grudge.” Zola said smugly.

Stephanie smirked, “It’s Director Barnes, and as for that second chance, you lost it when you called experimenting on my husband ’petty.’ ”

“My boy, top of his class at SHIELD Academy. Your mother and I couldn’t be prouder.” Bucky boasted, his smile highlighted by the wrinkles on his eyes and cheeks and the lines of gray running along the sides of his hair. The whole Barnes family clinked glasses in a toast around their dinner table. Suddenly, the phone rang from the living room.

Bucky rolled his eyes and he got up to get it, “What happened to good manners? No calling at dinner! That’s a simple courtesy.”

“It’s a good thing you finished a semester early,” Margaret sipped her tea, “I can’t imagine if my high school graduation had to compete with you in the spring.”

“Oh Madge,” Stephanie cooed, “We would’ve worked something out. I wouldn’t miss it for the
world."

“So have you decided between Princeton or Harvard yet?” Ian asked.

“Actually…” Margaret cleared her throat, “…At the college fair, I read some nice brochures about some nursing programs right here in D.C.”

“Nursing?” Stephanie furrowed her brow, “I could have sworn you said that you wanted to be a doctor.”

“Well I did, but then I talked to my counselor about it, and he suggested that nursing was more appropriate.” Margaret explained, avoiding her mom’s eyes.

“Uh oh…” Ian was forced to gulp his drink as he couldn’t hold back a grin.

“Margaret Sarah Barnes…” Stephanie started, “You know how much I respect nurses. After all, the grandmother whose name you carry was a nurse. Nurses have a very important job, but if you want to be a doctor, then you should pursue it.”

“But my counselor will only write me a letter of recommendation for a nursing school.” Margaret confessed.

Stephanie scoffed, “You don’t need his letter. Look at who you have around you. I’m the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D. Your father is the Secretary of Defense. There are so many important people who know you, the real you, who can write you dozens of letters when you apply for medical school. Who does this guy think he is, telling a teenage girl that she should do something more ‘appropriate’? I tell you, first thing tomorrow, I am going to that school and speaking with the principal.”

“You know what, Mom?” Ian smiled, “You should go in your Captain America costume, the principal has been dying to see real thing. He’ll do anything you want if you wear it.”

Stephanie laughed, “I haven’t put that old thing on in 20 years. It probably doesn’t fit anymore.”

Bucky finally returned to the table, “Sorry everyone. Good ol’ Howard just had to bother me with his girl troubles again.”

Stephanie smiled as she poked at her food, “Still trying to find a rebound girl after Maria?”

“Actually no,” Bucky rubbed his hands together, “He’s trying to win her back. You should’ve heard him; he’s a complete mess. ‘I went too far this time, Barnes, help me’ he cries, ‘I’ll do anything to get her back, anything!’ And you know what? I think he means it.”

Stephanie widened her eyes, “No… our Howard Stark? Begging for a woman to take him back? You don’t think this means…”

“…that he finally found ‘The One?’” Bucky smiled, with his sweet eyes locked on her.

“Well if he has, then I can see why he wouldn’t want to let her go.” Stephanie held his rough worn hand with her own.

By the time that Tony fully equipped himself in the Hulkbuster armor, the Hulk had already torn through several blocks of the city. The first line of defense was a steal trap designed to cage the green monster like a mouse. That failed when the Hulk destroyed the ground beneath him and burrowed
his way out like a mole.

“Alright everybody, stand down.” Tony commanded from Veronica, the suit bigger than five times his other suits.

The Hulk growled at him but dropped what he was doing as he focused on the threat in his gaze.

“You listening? That little witch is messing with your mind. You’re stronger than her, you’re smarter than her, you’re Bruce Banner.” Tony said.

Hulk roared at the name and pounded his fists wildly.

“Right, right, right, don’t mention puny Banner!” Tony said quickly before the Hulk threw a car at him and charged at him head on.

Since both she and her husband were high-ranking officials, Stephanie’s family had almost presidential levels of protection as they were escorted into the Pentagon. Outside the ring of security guards surrounding them was an even bigger circle of photographers, desperate to get pictures of the world-famous power family. Normally, walking into the building was no hassle, but today was different. Thousands of citizens had gathered in protest of the current war in Vietnam. As the crowd grew larger, they got louder and more aggressive, pushing past even the photographers to speak their piece with the Secretary of Defense and the Director of S.H.I.E.L.D.

“Director Barnes! How much longer are you going to send our children to die before you send your own?!”

“Why don’t you be Captain America when we really need it?”

“You call yourselves heroes?! You’re frauds!”

Bucky wrapped his arm around Stephanie as security pushed more people back. She knew she had to be professional, but those words still stung. She did everything she could. She eradicated every last trace of Hydra. Together, she and Bucky oversaw 99% of the country’s military actions, trying to stop bad men from forcing their will on good men. Where did they go wrong?

Suddenly, she saw a small black device fly from the police blockade into the crowd of protestors, and immediately recognized it as a grenade.

Stephanie forced herself out of Bucky’s arms, and pushed her security guards out of her way as she ran towards the crowd.

“Mom, what are you doing? Come back!” Her children yelled, but their voices were echoes far behind her.

“Get down!” Stephanie hollered, throwing everyone out of her way. She dived on top of the grenade right before its detonation. She took the whole impact, which split her whole body in half.

Stephanie jolted awake. The roaring crowds in her dream turned into the screaming streets projected on the quinjet’s monitors. Clint watched the fight between Hulk and Iron Man unfold until he felt
Stephanie’s strong grip on his shoulder.

“Holy shit, you scared me!” He said. While relieved that she was awake, she looked zombie-like with sunken eyes and a hollow expression.

“Drop me.” She ordered. “It’s time for a lullaby.”

Clint tried to talk her out of it, claiming she must still be delirious, so she grabbed the comm herself, telling Tony that she was ready to put the Hulk back to sleep.

“I think it’s a little late for that!” Tony responded, having just angered Hulk even more by punching out a tooth.

“Give me your location, Tony.” Stephanie said sternly.

“I can’t do that, we’re sort of on the move!” Tony said as he flew around with Hulk attached and pulling Veronica apart non-stop.

Stephanie booted Clint out of the pilot’s seat and looked for them on the live footage herself. When she saw their flying figures falling towards an unfinished building in the center of the city, she locked the coordinates and prepared for the drop.

By the time she got there, they had already leveled the whole structure. Tony was about to sock the Hulk with a final punch until he saw Stephanie standing in the wreckage, slowly walking towards the monster without a helmet or any back up to protect her.

She approached the Hulk as he emerged from the rubble, growling and looking around at all the people screaming in terror.

“Hey big guy…” She said sweetly, though her face and voice were exhausted and her hair was strewn all over her face and shoulders, “The sun’s getting real low.”

The Hulk turned to her voice and tuned out everything except her smile and her hand reaching for his. He copied her motions, reaching and then flipping his hand palm side up for her to gently caress with her fingers. She delicately brushed from the vein in his wrist to the tip of his middle finger, weakly smiling as she did so. When she pulled away, he did as well, huffing and breathing deeply as he shrunk back down.

Bruce caught Stephanie as she fainted.
“The news is loving you guys. Nobody else is.” Agent Hill reported from the screen on the quinjet. Everyone else was dead silent. Hawkeye was one of the few who evaded the Maximoff girl, so he got to pilot while the rest of the team fell into deep thought about their visions. No one wanted to describe what they saw, not even Stephanie. She didn’t want anyone to compare their pain and fight over who had it worst. She was just grateful that they calmed Bruce down in time and got him out of there in time.

“There’s been no official call for Banner’s arrest, but it’s in the air.” Hill added.

Stephanie sat in her seat and stared at the ground. Her mind was tempted to drift back into that other life she dreamed up. Maximoff couldn’t have known that much about her, so she must’ve triggered her to hallucinate and let her brain fill in the rest. She couldn’t keep thinking about it though. She had to be stronger than this. She had to be the leader, now more than ever.

“Stark Relief Foundation?” Tony asked.

“Already on the scene. How’s the team?”

“Everyone’s…” Tony looked around and couldn’t bring himself to lie, “…We took a hit. We’ll shake it off.”

Stephanie looked at Bruce, who sat on the floor, sweating and swaddling himself in a blanket. He shook like he had fever chills. Natasha sat in the seat closest to him, with her face as still as a statute. Whatever she saw, she was trying to hide how much it affected her.

“Well for now, I’d stay in stealth mode, and stay away from here.”

“So…run and hide.” Tony said, displeased with that idea.

“Until we find Ultron, I don’t have a lot else to offer.” Hill said sympathetically.

“Neither do we.” Tony said sadly before he cut off their comm. He didn’t feel good about his teammates experiencing the Maximoff girl’s spell for themselves, but at least they all had an idea of what he went through that led him to make Ultron in the first place.

“Hey, you wanna switch out?” Tony asked Clint.

“No, I’m good. If you wanna get some kip, now’s a good time, because we’re still a few hours out.”

“A few hours from where?”

“A safe house.”

The quinjet landed on a grassy plain in the middle of a forest. Stephanie helped Bruce up on his feet while Clint held Nat on his shoulder as they walked to a two-story farmhouse surrounded by a wooden fence.

“What is this place?” Thor asked.
“A safehouse?” Tony added.

“Let’s hope.” Clint answered as he opened the door and walked inside. Stephanie thought it was rude for him to barge in on the premises until he announced loudly,

“Honey, I’m home!”

Stephanie froze in disbelief. A beautiful brown-haired very pregnant woman walked in from the kitchen holding drawings and crayons.

“Hi…company. Sorry I didn’t call ahead.” Clint explained to his…wife…as he greeted her with a hug and a kiss.

“…This is an agent of some kind.” Tony said, just as bewildered as she was.

“Everybody…this is Laura.” Clint formally introduced his wife to everyone. Stephanie didn’t blame him for keeping his family a secret for their own protection, but she never met an agent who kept that a secret from even his trusted friends.

“I know all your names.” Laura smiled.

Before anyone could say a word to her, footsteps audibly grew closer until two children, a boy and a girl, appeared ecstatically yelling, “Daddy!”

“Hi, sweetheart! Hey buddy! How you guys doing?” Clint smiled as he picked his daughter up and hugged his son and kissed him on the head.

Stephanie almost fainted again. The children looked similar to Ian and Madge. She had to pinch herself to make sure she wasn’t still dreaming. She opened her mouth to speak, but closed it when she realized her breath was too shaky and her voice would quiver.

“These are…smaller agents.” Tony said.

“Did you bring Auntie Nat?” The little girl asked.

Natasha’s face came back to life when she heard that. “Why don’t you hug her and find out?”

Stephanie watched the little girl jump into Nat’s arms. Natasha Romanoff, expert spy, famous for letting no one know her true mind, had been let in on Clint’s secret and allowed a part in this domestic scene before her. The reasonable part of Stephanie knew that Clint and Natasha had known each other longer and built up that friendship long before she met either of them, but she still felt a sting of hurt. She could’ve been Auntie Stephanie if Clint had let her. She really wanted to. Here she thought that the whole team had been sacrificing the chance for a home and a family to become Avengers, but Clint managed to have it all, and Natasha knew. Natasha, who listened to Stephanie long for a family of her own for years, even before Bucky came back, had nodded and smiled for her but ultimately said nothing.

“Sorry to barge in on you.” Stephanie managed to get words out calmly.

“But we were too busy having no idea that you existed.” Tony finished for her.

“Yeah, well Fury helped me set this up when I joined. He kept it off S.H.I.E.L.D’s files. I’d like to keep it that way.” Clint explained, “I figured it’s a good place to lay low.”

Stephanie had even more questions now, but couldn’t bring herself to say anything else to the
glowing pregnant wife whose belly Natasha was rubbing and asking about.

“How’s little Natasha?” Nat asked.

“She’s a…Nathaniel.” Laura bit her lip.

The pure tenderness was ripping a hole in Stephanie’s heart. She had to look away. She distracted herself by watching Thor accidentally step on a Lego house and kick the remains under the couch. As she watched him more intently, she noticed him blinking more rapidly, like he was still trying to shake off his own vision as well. When the toaster popping made him jolt, he swiftly left the room without a word. Stephanie quickly followed behind him.

“Thor.” She called out.

“I saw something in that dream. I need answers. I won’t find them here.” He barely explained. Then, with a swift swing of his hammer, he took off, leaving Stephanie alone on the patio.

She took in the scenery around her. The beautiful green grass fit well with the scent of pine and sound of birds chirping. The house was the kind she always wanted, big and spacious for family gatherings with an open yard for the children to play. She and Bucky once dreamed of saving up and moving uptown into a house like this. She turned around and looked back inside at the family Clint had made for himself, a beautiful wife, two happy children with another one on the way.

“We can go home.”

“I want to hold her!”

“Your mother and I couldn’t be prouder.”

She took one step forward, and it felt like she stepped on glass. Her eyes watered too quickly, and tears streamed down before she could stop it. She couldn’t go back in there like this. She couldn’t let the team see her this way. They needed her to be strong right now if they wanted to take on Ultron. She covered her mouth to hide her sobs. She stormed out to the back to escape the domestic fantasy that taunted her from the inside.
Dirty Laundry

Natasha waited on the bed for Bruce to finish in the shower. From the window, she could see Stephanie and Tony chopping wood. Earlier, she saw Stephanie sitting on the tree stump and crying. She knew that she was sensitive, but she didn’t know Clint’s farm would upset her this much. If she had been in her right mind on the quinjet, she would’ve told him to pick a different safe house. He didn’t need to risk his family’s safety for them. Of course, maybe it wasn’t just the house and the kids, maybe Stephanie’s vision got the best of her. After all, Natasha’s was vivid enough that she was still seeing flashes of it.

She could feel her back on the cold operating table as the doctor pushed her down the hall. The sharp scalpel sliced into her abdomen.

Bruce walked out of the bathroom with a towel on around his waist and another on his shoulder.

“I…didn’t realize you were waiting.” He said shyly.

“I would’ve joined you, but it didn’t seem like the right time.” Natasha fixed her robe.

“I used up all the hot water.” Bruce admitted.

“I should’ve joined you.” She shrugged.

“Missed that window.” He replied.

“Did we?” She looked at him thoughtfully.

As she looked at him, he was reminded of how Stephanie had looked at him when she did the lullaby. She pulled herself out of her nightmare and used the last of her energy just to help him. What did he do to deserve their kindness?

“The world just saw the Hulk, the real Hulk, for the first time.” He explained as he slipped into his button-up shirt, “You know I have to leave.”

“And you assume that I have to stay?” Natasha said.

“I…I can’t do this.” Bruce rubbed his temples.

“What?” Natasha goaded him on.

“You and Steph. I’m not used to this much attention from two women.” Bruce tucked his hands in uncomfortably.

“Stephanie’s the one who set us up.” Natasha had to chuckle, “She’s not after you.”

“Are you positive? Because at the party, she...” He started to explain, but then he stopped himself.

“What?” Natasha goaded him on.

“Nothing, she just...kind of flirted with me and told me that I should’ve asked her out when I had the
chance. I don’t know…she was drunk, but then she did the lullaby like she was out to steal that from you, and…” Bruce shook his head, “…I just don’t know.”

“Stephanie…just wants you to be happy,” Natasha couldn’t hide her knowing smile as she grabbed Bruce’s hand, “She wants us to be happy. She wants to give us what she can’t have herself.”

“What does that even mean?” Bruce asked, “What can’t she have?”

Natasha looked off to the side and sighed. She knew that to earn someone’s trust you had to give a little, but not too much. She also heard Ultron say that Stephanie couldn’t live without her soldier, and she knew what he meant. If Ultron told the team the truth before Stephanie could, it could weaken their trust in her. She didn’t want that for her friend. Perhaps Stephanie would understand one day why she did this now.

“Okay, I’ll admit…Stephanie did used to like you, but when we were in D.C, something happened…” Natasha explained, looking into Bruce’s eyes so he could see her honesty.

“She met Sam.” Bruce knew that much.

“…and the Winter Soldier.” Natasha continued.

“…the guy who almost killed her?” Bruce eyes narrowed in concern. Natasha nodded. He stuttered, “Are you…are you telling me that Cap is with the crazy assassin guy?”

“No, not like that, or at least not anymore…” Natasha took a deep breath and spat out what she promised Stephanie she wouldn’t reveal, “…The Winter Soldier turned out to be Bucky Barnes, her husband.”

“…But I thought he was dead. He died in World War II.” Bruce sat down, trying to take it all in.

“As far as the world is concerned, he still is. But those of us who were in DC know that Hydra kept him alive and turned him into, as you called him, the crazy assassin guy. She stopped him, but he got away. We’ve been looking for him ever since.” Natasha crossed her arms, feeling less guilty than she thought she would.

“Why didn’t she tell us?” Bruce asked.

Natasha shook her head, “She likes to keep her dirty laundry separate, and she doesn’t think you’ll all be on board with saving him. He’s not the easiest person to get along with these days.”

Now it was Bruce’s turn to chuckle, “He can’t be worse than me.”

“Cap…Stephanie…she’s always wanted this,” Natasha walked around and touched the children’s drawings on the desk, “The house, the husband, the kids…She doesn’t want to be Captain America forever.”

“She doesn’t have to.” Bruce said, “We finished off Hydra. If we found Barnes tomorrow, she could turn in her shield and retire on the spot. I can’t give up being the Hulk. Where am I not a threat? Even if I didn’t just…there’s no future with me. I can’t have any of this. Do the math, I physically can’t.”

Natasha smiled for a moment, but then her face slowly fell, “Thing is…even if she does find him, I hope that Hydra didn’t do to him…what the Red Room did to me…”

Bruce looked at her gently.
“If you finish your training…there’s a graduation ceremony.” Natasha’s eyes welled up, “They sterilize you. It’s efficient, one less thing to worry about, the one thing that might matter more than a mission. Makes everything easier…even killing.”

She approached Bruce slowly, “You think I’m the only one who can be with a monster?”

“So…” Bruce said softly, “…we disappear?”

“Thor didn’t say where he was going for answers?” Tony asked as he put another log on the chopping block. He didn’t want to leave Stephanie by herself, and he also didn’t want to get one-upped by her doing chores for Mrs. Barton right away.

“Sometimes my teammates don’t tell me things. I was kind of hoping Thor would be the exception.” Stephanie avoided direct eye contact with Tony until the redness in her eyes died down. She knew that she was being hypocritical, but some things weren’t on a need-to-know basis right now, and other things were.

“Yeah, give him time. We don’t know what the Maximoff kid showed him.” Tony looked at her, trying to get a read on her beyond the coldness of her voice.

“Earth’s Mightiest Heroes…” Stephanie shook her head and she took another swing with the ax, “…pulled us apart like cotton candy.”

“Seems like you walked away alright,” Tony said, “After all, you were the first to wake up and you turned Bruce back to normal.”

Stephanie pursed her lip. On the one hand, at least that meant that her façade was working, but on the other hand…

“Is that a problem?”

“I don’t trust a person without a dark side.” Tony swung his ax almost as powerfully as she did, “Call me old fashioned.”

Now Stephanie’s frustration started to bubble up in her. Captain America wasn’t allowed to have a dark side. She had to be the golden girl, the poster woman, the idol. She couldn’t possibly explain that to Tony so she simply said, “Well, let’s just say that you haven’t seen it yet.”

“You know Ultron is trying to tear us apart, right?” Tony changed the subject.

“Well I guess you’d know. Whether you’d tell us is a bit of a question.” Stephanie snapped.

“Banner and I were doing research.” Tony explained.

“That would affect the team.” Steph interrupted as she pulled another log from the pile.

“That would end the team. Isn’t that the mission? Isn’t that the ‘why we fight?’ So we can end the fight? So we get to go home?” Tony scolded.

Stephanie pretended the log in her hand was Tony’s head. She ripped it apart with her bare hands.

“Every time someone tries to win a war before it starts, innocent people die.” She said quietly, “Every time.”
“I’m sorry, Mr. Stark?” Laura quietly interrupted, “Clint said you wouldn’t mind, but our tractor doesn’t seem to want to start at all. I thought maybe you might…”

“Sure, I’ll give her a kick.” Tony dropped his axe and looked back at Stephanie, “Don’t take from my pile.”

Stephanie dropped her axe, too. Chopping wood hadn’t been as therapeutic as she had hoped, so greeted Mrs. Barton politely and went inside to help clean up after the children as the wife and mother prepared dinner for them.
“Ultron took you folks out of play to buy himself time.” Nick Fury explained after dinner. He surprised everyone with his sudden visit except for Laura. She had already prepared his favorite plate was and knew how he liked his iced tea. Of course, he got right down to business, but while everyone sat around or distracted themselves, Stephanie washed the dishes as she listened to him.

“My contacts all say he’s building something. The amount of vibranium he made off with, I don’t think it’s just one thing.” Fury continued.

“What about Ultron himself?” Stephanie didn’t even turn to look at him as she wiped the casserole dish with a soapy sponge.

“Oh, he’s easy to track. He’s everywhere. Guy’s multiplying faster than a Catholic rabbit. Still doesn’t help us get an angle on any of his plans though.” Nick started to make himself a sandwich.

“He still going after launch codes?” Tony asked as he threw darts.

“Yes, he is, but he’s not making any headway.”

“I cracked the Pentagon’s firewall in high school on a dare.” Tony sounded like he was boasting, but Stephanie got his point. Ultron should be able to do whatever Tony could, and more.

“Well, I contacted our friends at the Nexus about that.” Fury replied.

“Nexus?” Stephanie asked.

“It’s the world internet hub in Oslo,” Bruce explained, still exhausted from his code green, “Every byte of data flows through there, fastest access on earth.”

“So what’d they say?” Clint asked as he twirled a dart in his fingers.

“He’s fixated on the missiles, but the codes are constantly being changed.”

“By whom?” Tony asked, right before Clint through a dart right past his face and hit the bullseye on the dartboard.

“Party’s unknown.” Fury sounded impressed.

“We have an ally?” Natasha asked, with her hand on a drawing given to her by Lila, Clint’s little girl.

“Ultron’s got an enemy. That’s not the same thing.” Fury clarified, “Still I’d pay folding money to know who it is.”

“I might need to visit Oslo,” Tony asserted, “Find our unknown.”

“Well this is good times, boss, but I was kind of hoping when I saw you, you’d have more than that.” Natasha smiled weakly.

“I do.” Fury shrugged, “I have you.”

Everyone looked at him in confusion, seeing as how they weren’t in the best condition to fight right now.
“Back in the day, I had eyes everywhere, and ears everywhere else. You kids had all the tech you
could dream up. Here we all are, back on Earth, with nothing but our wit and our will to save the
world. Ultron says the Avengers are the only thing between him and his mission, and whether or not
he admits it, his mission...is global destruction.”

Everyone looked around as his words sunk into them.

“All of this, laid in a grave.” He gestured to the home around them, “So stand. Outwit the platinum
bastard.”

“Steph doesn’t like that kind of talk.” Natasha jested.

Stephanie set her sponge down, “You know what, Romanoff?”

“So what does he want?” Fury asked.

Stephanie thought about it, and then turned around to make sure the whole team heard, “To become
better. Better than us. He keeps building bodies.”

“Person bodies.” Tony added, “The human form is insufficient. Biologically speaking, we’re
outmoded, but he keeps coming back to it.”

“When you two programmed him to protect the human race, you amazingly failed.” Natasha said.

“They don’t need to be protected,” Bruce said as he looked down at Lila’s painted picture of a
butterfly, “They need to evolve.”

He looked up at everyone, “Ultron’s going to evolve.”

“How?”

Bruce thought deeply for a moment, “Has anyone been in contact with Helen Cho?”

Stephanie changed back into her uniform and attacked her shield to her back magnetically, “I’ll take
Natasha and Clint.”

“Alright, strictly recon. I’ll hit the Nexus. I’ll join you as soon as I can.” Tony formed his half of the
plan while calibrating the functions on his watch.

“If Ultron is really building a body…” Stephanie started.

“...he’ll be more powerful than any of us. Maybe all of us, an android designed by a robot.” Tony
was starting to worry in his voice again.

Stephanie quietly sighed, “You know I really miss the days when the weirdest thing science ever
created was me.”

“I’ll drop Banner off at the tower. You mind if I borrow Ms. Hill?” Fury asked as he put on his coat.

“She’s all yours...apparently,” Tony murmured, “What are you going to do?”

“I don’t know.” Fury gave a sly smile, “Something dramatic, I hope.”
Everyone got their stuff together and said goodbye to Laura and the children. Stephanie hugged her and thanked her for everything, wishing her good luck with the new baby before she stepped inside the quinjet. She didn’t take a final look at the farmhouse before they took off.
Facing the Monster

The quinjet dropped Stephanie off a few buildings away from the U-Gin Genetic Research Facility. If Ultron was still inside, challenging him directly would endanger everyone inside.

“Two minutes. Stay close.” She warned over the comm.

She bolted down the street and into the building, finding it almost empty. No Ultron, no Maximoffs, only wounded staff. She rushed to Dr. Cho’s laboratory and found it in shambles.

“Dr. Cho!” Stephanie exclaimed as she spotted her injured on the ground, but still alive. She grabbed a gauze and applied pressure to the doctor’s burnt and bleeding shoulder.

“He’s uploading himself into the body.” Dr. Cho warned weakly.

“Where?”

Dr. Cho couldn’t answer, and Stephanie had to go after him now. Before she could leave though, the doctor grabbed her shoulder and added,

“The real power is inside the cradle…the gem…its power is uncontainable. You can’t just blow it up. You have to get the cradle to Stark.”

“First, I have to find it.”

“Go.” Dr. Cho released her.

“You guys copy that?” Steph asked her team as she headed for the streets.

“Got it.”

“I got a private jet taking off across town. No manifest. That could be him.”

Clint spotted a large 8-wheeler below on the highway, “There. It’s a truck from the lab. Right above you, Cap. On the loop by the bridge. It’s them. Got three in the cradle, one in the cab. I could take out the driver.”

“Negative,” Stephanie ordered as she climbed up the escape ladder on the highway beam, “That truck crashes, the gem could level the city. We need to draw out Ultron.”

She reached the highest loop and spotted the truck about to pass right under her. At the right moment, she leaped off the barrier and caught it, rolling across the top until she grabbed ahold of the door. Suddenly, the door burst open with a fiery blast and swung wildly, smashing her against the side. She kicked to swing back, and only got a quick peek inside before Ultron blast the door off its hinges and sent her in the air. Luckily the bent door remained attached by one bolt towards the bottom, so it lay flat out to catch her. However, it scraped against the road making sparks and screeching uncontrollably.

“Well, he’s definitely unhappy! I’m gonna try to keep him that way.” Stephanie had to shout over the loud traffic.

“You’re not a match for him, Cap.” Clint warned.

Stephanie sighed, “Thanks, Barton.”
She surfed the door for as long as she could, but when Ultron eventually spotted her, he blasted her away and into a car windshield. She held on tightly to keep from falling on the road, and launched herself at the large garbage truck passing by in the next lane. She used her momentum to swing back on top of the U-Gin truck.

“You know what’s in that cradle?” Ultron snuck up in front of her, “The power to make real change, and that terrifies you.”

“I wouldn’t call it a comfort.” She snapped as she threw her shield at him, which threw him back before it returned to her. She covered herself to avoid his blasts and threw it again hard enough to lodge it in his chest.

“Stop it.” He said very annoyed, discarding the shield into the street and blasting her in the chest. She fell back towards the front of the truck and caught the windshield just in time to see one of his smaller bodies in the driver’s seat. It thrust its claws through the glass aiming at her throat, she swung away just in time, crawling back to the top of the truck and jumping when Ultron wasn’t looking to grab him in a headlock.

Ultron grabbed Steph’s arm and tried to twist it behind her back. When he caught her off-balance, he grabbed her neck and hoisted her over the side of the truck. As she struggled in his grip, she saw Natasha driving right beside them, carrying her shield. She tossed it back to her so Stephanie could whack Ultron off of her and land right back on the truck. She threw a bunch of punches at Ultron before he blasted her off once again into another car.

This time, with a clutch of his fist, he pulled up the ground beneath the car to flip it over, sending her spinning across the road. She continued to pursue the truck, dodging all the cars that were now rolling in her direction.

“C’mon!” She taunted Ultron as she came back to punch his face in. She didn’t care how many times he was willing to try to get rid of her, she would always stand up to him. When Clint finally came to help with the quinjet cannons, he distracted him for a few moments before Ultron sent two of his bodies after him. She tried to avoid kicking him or else she risked throwing off her balance. Every thrust of her fist bent him or knocked him back. She even managed to threw him off the truck and into the highway pillar. When he tried to come back, she threw herself into him and sent them both flying into a running train, breaking into the passenger carriage.

She stood across from him on the empty side of the train, so that any blasts towards her wouldn’t hit any passengers by mistake. She kicked up her shield and kept throwing it at his neck and chest. Since they were both vibranium, it was the only chance she had of doing any serious damage. It was also her only protection against his energy blasts, although at this range, they were still powerful enough to knock her down. The important thing was that while Ultron was busy fighting her, he wasn’t paying attention to the cradle.

“I’m going in. Cap, can you keep him occupied?” Natasha asked.

“What do you think I’ve been doing?” Stephanie replied exasperated. So the best strategy now was to play cat and mouse. Now that she had angered him, Ultron wouldn’t stop until he taught her a lesson. Fortunately, she was a slow learner. She dodged his punches, and tried to keep him away from the civilians cowering behind their seats. However, he caught one solid punch to her gut, which made her cry out.

Before Ultron could land another hit, a silvery blur knocked him out of the way and her to the ground. When she looked up, she saw Pietro Maximoff staring at Ultron defiantly, and Wanda Maximoff blocking his way by levitating two metal gates.
“Please, don’t do this.” Ultron practically begged them in a low voice, which surprised Stephanie.

“What choice do we have?” Wanda replied angrily.

The twins attacked him simultaneously, which caused Ultron to flee from the broken train. Stephanie ran towards his escape in the front of the train and reported over her comm,

“I lost him! He’s headed your way!”

She found the engineer knocked out cold by the blast, and the train was still traveling at full speed.

“Cap, you see Nat?” Clint asked.

“If you have the package, get it to Stark! Go!” Stephanie barked.

“Do you have eyes on Nat?” Clint repeated more urgently.

“Go!” Stephanie ordered. She had a more pressing matter at hand. She turned to the Maximoffs, silently proud that they finally decided to do the right thing.

“Civilians in our path.” She said firmly. Pietro took it upon himself to quickly get everyone on the streets out of the way.

“Can you stop this thing?” Stephanie asked Wanda. The girl looked shaken, unable to answer. Stephanie moved on to shield the remaining passengers. She braced for impact when the train starting running through whole buildings.

Wanda placed her hands towards the ground and summoned her red force fields to surround the body of the train and work against it. Eventually, the train slowed down until it reached a screeching halt. Stephanie fell forward and finally took a moment to breathe. Once everyone got off the train to safety, she walked up to confront the Maximoffs. Just because they were finally cooperating doesn’t mean they were off the hook for everything else.

“I’m fine, I just need a minute,” Pietro sat outside of a nearby store, heaving as his sister comforted him.

“I’m very tempted not to give you one.” Stephanie said in an authoritative tone.

“The Cradle. Did you get it?” Wanda asked. She knew how dangerous it was.

“Stark will take care of it.” Stephanie answered her, but it didn’t comfort her.

Wanda shook her head in fear, “No, he won’t.”

Stephanie honestly knew why she was so afraid, but she also knew Tony better than they did, and she couldn’t let mistrust poison the team any further.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about. Stark’s not crazy.” Stephanie insisted.

“He will do anything to make things right.” Wanda argued, unphased.

Stephanie looked deep into Wanda’s eyes and knew that her anger towards Tony was strong. Nothing she could say could convince her otherwise. The only thing she could do was talk to Tony himself.

“Stark, come in.” Stephanie called on the comm, but was met with no answer, “Stark...Anyone on
“Ultron can’t tell the difference between saving the world and destroying it. Where do you think he gets that?” Wanda said.

Although she hated to admit it, perhaps Wanda had a point. Just days ago, Thor trusted Tony with the scepter and he used it to make Ultron, and now she had just given him a device that makes synthetic tissue with a powerful energy source inside. Did she really expect Tony to just let it sit there? If she knew Stark, she knew that he was already tinkering with it and playing with the possibilities without considering the risks. She ordered the twins to follow her back to Avengers Tower. Hopefully, she and Wanda were wrong about this.
As Stephanie entered Tony’s laboratory, her fears were confirmed. Bruce was adjusting the power sources connected to the cradle while Tony typed away streaks of code on his laptop.

“I’m going to say this once.” Stephanie snapped, furious that they were fueling the twin’s mistrust in them.

“How about nunce?” Tony responded like a child.

“Shut it down!” She ordered.

“Nope, not gonna happen.” Tony brushed her off as he continued his work. When they were in his territory, he never listened to Stephanie.

“You don’t know what you’re doing.” She warned them urgently. Dr. Cho said the power in the gem was unfathomable. Last time Stephanie watched a crazy scientist grab that kind of power source, he disintegrated into a portal to the stars.

“And you do?” Bruce asked defiantly and gestured to Wanda, “She’s not in your head?”

“I know you’re angry.” Wanda stepped in front of Stephanie to defend herself.

“Oh we’re way past that,” Bruce said in his low voice, “I could choke the life out of you and never change a shade.”

Stephanie marched towards Bruce, infuriated that he was threatening them while doing something so dangerous, “Banner, after everything that’s happened-!”

“It’s nothing compared to what’s coming.” Tony shot back.

“You don’t know what’s in there!” Wanda argued.

“This isn’t a game!” Stephanie had to shout to talk over everyone.

Suddenly, a swift rush of wind blew past all of them as Pietro stood holding an unplugged regulator, “No no. Go on. You were saying?”

A shot rang out, and the glass floor beneath Pietro shattered. Wanda called after him as he hit the floor below. The computer screens beeped alarms warning a critical power failure in the cradle.

“I’m rerouting the upload.” Tony announced, probably to Bruce, but Stephanie took the chance to throw her shield at the servers.

Tony retaliated by summoning the gauntlet of his suit and shooting Stephanie square in the chest. She fell back on the floor and her shield escaped from her. She got back on her feet and charged at him with her fist striking him in the chest. Before she landed her blow, he fired at her again, so they both flew backwards in opposing directions. Stephanie yelped as she landed on broken glass at the bottom of the stairs. She saw Wanda fighting off Bruce, but before she could run to her aid, Thor unceremoniously returned and set his eyes on the cradle.

She feared that Thor would destroy it and unleash the power of the gem inside, but she was powerless as the blinding light of Mjolnir rained down in lightening around him. Everyone watched as he channeled the energy into the cradle, restoring its power and completing the project. They all
stood in silence, and then the cradle exploded, sending Thor to the ground.

A human-like figure emerged, with skin that was metallic in green and purple hues. The “man” stood in the remains of his cradle, looking around and taking in the environment around him. Suddenly, he flew at Thor, but he was caught and thrown through the glass wall and towards the window. The figure stopped and floated just before he hit the glass. Stephanie was about to go after him, but Thor held his hand out to stop her. The metallic man looked out towards the city with an outstretched hand and focused on his own reflection. Slowly, he floated back towards everyone and placed his feet on the ground.

“I’m sorry, that was...odd.” The figure’s soft voice sounded like J.A.R.V.I.S and looked at Thor and created a cape for himself out of thin air, “Thank you.”

“Thor,” Stephanie asked, “You helped create this?”

“I’ve had a vision,” Thor explained and pointed to the gem in metallic man’s forehead, “A whirlpool that sucks in all hope of life and at its center is that.”

“What, the gem?” Bruce asked.

“It’s the Mind Stone.” Thor clarified, “It’s one of the six Infinity Stones. The greatest power in the universe, unparalleled in its destructive capabilities.”

“Then why would you bring-” Stephanie asked, still confused on why he would enable them to use it.

“Because Stark is right.” Thor answered.

“Oh, it’s definitely the end times,” Bruce took the words out of Stephanie’s mouth.

“The Avengers cannot defeat Ultron.” Thor said.

“Not alone.” The metallic man answered.

“Why does your vision sound like J.A.R.V.I.S?” She asked.

“We...reconfigured J.A.R.V.I.S’s matrix...” Tony explained as he remained in awe of the “vision” in his gaze, “...to create something new.”

“I think I’ve had my fill of new.” Stephanie said, still skeptical of whether or not this new robot was a threat.

“You think I’m a child of Ultron.” The creation replied to her fear.

“You’re not?” Stephanie needed to know how this sentient android identified itself.

“I’m not Ultron...I am not J.A.R.V.I.S...I am...” The figure thought for a while, and realized he didn’t even know for himself what he was, “...I am.”

“I looked in your head, and I saw annihilation.” Wanda confronted him directly, not afraid as Stephanie was.

“Look again.” He told her.

“Ha,” Clint interrupted, “Her seal of approval means jack to me.”

“Their powers, the horrors in our heads, Ultron himself,” Thor continued, “They all came from the
Mind Stone, and they’re nothing compared to what it can unleash. But, with it on our side…”

“Is it?” Stephanie needed to make sure of that first, so she turned to the android himself, “Are you...on our side?”

He was quiet and simply answered, “I don’t think it’s that simple.”

“Well, it better get real simple real soon.” Clint said.

“I am on the side of life,” he explained, “Ultron isn’t. He will end it all.”

“What’s he waiting for?” Tony asked.

“You.”

“Where?” Bruce asked.

“Sokovia,” Clint had gotten this answer just before the big fight, “He’s got Nat there, too.”

Bruce approached the android quietly, “If we’re wrong about you. If you’re the monster Ultron made you to be…”

“What will you do?” The metallic man asked, sending a chill through everyone’s spine. He further explained, “I don’t want to kill Ultron. He’s unique, and he’s in pain, but that pain will roll over the Earth, so he must be destroyed. Every form that he’s built, every trace of his presence on the on the net. We have to act now, and not one of us can do it without the others.”

The man looked at the people around him, and saw that they were not eased.

“Maybe I am a monster,” he looked down at his own build, “I don’t think I’d know if I were one. I’m not what you are, and not what you intended. So there may be no way to make you trust me.”

The man grabbed Mjolnir and held it towards Thor, “But we need to go.”

If they were bewildered before, now they were in disbelief. Whatever this man was, he picked up the hammer without a thought and just waited for Thor to take it from him. As Thor grabbed it, the man walked away without looking at them or even a sense of accomplishment. He didn’t even know what he’d just done. Everyone took a moment to come back to themselves, with Thor being the first to break the silence.

“Right..” Thor patted the hammer and patted Tony on the shoulder, “Well done.”

Looks like Stephanie had no choice but to consider him a part of the team now.

“Three minutes.” She ordered everyone, “Get what you need.”
“No way we all get through this. If even one tin soldier is left standing, we’ve lost.” Tony said, “There’s gonna be blood on the floor.”

“I’ve got no plans tomorrow night.” Stephanie jested.

“I get the first crack at the big guy.” Tony set up a plan, “Iron Man’s the one he’s waiting for.”

“That’s true. He hates you the most.” Vision butt in as he walked past them. Stephanie was growing fonder of him already.

“Ultron knows we’re coming.” She prepared the team once everyone boarded the quinjet, “Odds are we’ll be riding into heavy fire, and that’s what we signed up for.”

She looked at the Maximoff twins, knowing their loyalty had to be earned, “But the people of Sokovia...they didn’t. So our priority is getting them out. All they want is to live their lives in peace, and that’s not going to happen today, but we can do our best to protect them, and we can get the job done.”

She faced the rest of the team, “We find out what Ultron’s been building. We find Romanoff, and we clear the field. Keep the fight between us.”

She lowered her head, slowly feeling the weight of the task at hand, “Ultron thinks we’re monsters, that we’re what’s wrong with the world. This isn’t just about beating him...it’s about whether he’s right.”

While the other Avengers scattered on their separate assignments, Stephanie assisted the twins with the evacuation. Pietro ran to every police station to alert the authorities, while Wanda used her mind control powers to make citizens leave their homes immediately. Stephanie guided the traffic congesting at the bridge on the border. Some people just ran across the sidewalk carrying as many belongings as they could.

The peaceful procedure didn’t last very long. Suddenly, Ultron’s smaller bodies burst out from under the pavement and attacked those trying to escape. The escape bridge had quickly become a battlefield. Stephanie lead people out of the way as she tackled the robots herself. She threw them into abandoned cars and ripped them apart limb from limb, but every one she destroyed was quickly replaced by more.

Suddenly, the bridge in front of her appeared to be collapsing, and with a closer look, she realized it wasn’t the ground below that was falling, the ground she stood on was ascending. It didn’t stop at the bridge either, the whole perimeter around Sokovia was breaking as the city was lifted into the air.

“Do you see? The beauty of it? The inevitability? You rise, only to fall. You, Avengers, you are my meteor. My swift and terrible sword, and the earth will crack with the weight of your failure. Purge me from your computers, turn my own flesh against me. It means nothing. When the dust settles, the only thing living in this world...will be metal.”

Ultron’s monologuing was really pissing her off, and besides the Hulk, Captain America was the last person you wanted to make angry. She punched the next robot’s face in so hard, it caved in right away. She switched her mission from getting everyone to the border to keeping everyone away from it. She was so focused on the robots coming from the ground that she was taken by surprise by the
airborne one that rammed into her gut and threw her across a string of cars.

“Cap, you got incoming.” Tony warned her a second too late.

“Incoming already came in.” She grunted as she pried herself off the windshield, “Stark, you worry about bringing the city back down safely. The rest of us have one job. Tear these things apart. You get hurt, hurt ‘em back. You get killed...walk it off.”

She heard panicked screaming on one of the nearby bridges and ran to it immediately. The cars that had almost gotten out of the city were now trapped near the crumbling edge. She barely caught one car by the bumper as the ground fell beneath it, but couldn’t pull it back up to the surface. Suddenly, the bumper broke off, and the car as well as the one next to it slipped off the edge. Thankfully, Thor flew after them to pull the passengers from their vehicles. He threw a woman up towards Stephanie, who clung to road’s end and caught the woman’s arm tightly.

“I got you! Just look at me!” She told the screaming woman who was trembling as she looked at the ground getting further away. With one powerful pull, she threw herself and the woman up closer to the surface and helped her climb back up to safety.

“You can’t save them all.” Ultron taunted as his minion charged towards her. She threw her shield which cut through the torso.

“You’ll never-” It cut off as she summoned her shield back and discarded the remains over the edge.

“You’ll never what? You didn’t finish!” She taunted him right back. Thor finally returned with the second fallen car and everyone inside it, “What, were you napping?”

The legion of Ultron bodies firing on civilians drew their attention away from the border and closer into the city. When enough of them were in formation, she threw her shield up and let Thor hit it like a baseball using Mjolnir as the bat. They knocked out several bots in one swing. However, Thor’s support was quickly swept away by Ultron who literally carried him off.

“Alright, we’re all clear here.” Clint reported on the comm.

“We are not clear!” Steph shouted as she took on robots by herself once more, “We are very not clear!”

“Alright, we’re coming to you.”

Stephanie patrolled the rest of the perimeter and found Natasha still alive and punching her way through the endless horde of robots. She threw her shield at the one attacking her and called out, “Romanoff!”

“Thanks.” Natasha called back as she used the shield to protect herself from incoming fire and swinging at the charging bot before throwing it back to Stephanie to give her the honor of decapitating it.

Once things died down a bit, she directed the team’s efforts towards getting people to shelter.

“The next wave’s gonna hit any minute. What do you got, Stark?”

“Nothing great.” Tony reported in a low disheartened voice, “Maybe a way to blow up the city...that’ll keep it from impacting the surface if you guys can get clear.”

“I asked for a solution, not an escape plan.” She stated.
“Impact radius is getting bigger every second. We’re going to have to make a choice.”

“Cap, these people are going nowhere.” Natasha said, “If Stark finds a way to blow this rock-”

“Not ‘til everyone’ safe.” Stephanie said firmly.

“Everyone up here versus everyone down there? There’s no math there.” Natasha argued.

“I’m not leaving this rock with one civilian on it.” Stephanie couldn’t think of a better solution either, and that angered her.

“I didn’t say we should leave.” Natasha smiled weakly, letting Stephanie know that staying with the people of Sokovia could still honor them even if she failed to save them, “There’s worse ways to go...where else am I gonna get a view like this?”

“Glad you like the view, Romanoff,” A familiar older voice suddenly appeared on their comms, “It’s about to get better.”

A giant helicarrier emblazoned with the S.H.I.E.L.D logo rose up from the clouds, armed and loaded.

“Nice right? Pulled her out of mothballs with a couple of old friends. She’s dusty, but she’ll do.”

“Fury, you son of a bitch.” Stephanie smiled in relief.

“Ooh, you kiss your mother with that mouth?” He sassed her back.

The Helicarrier deployed enough lifeboats to surround the city and take in hundreds of citizens at a time.

“This is S.H.I.E.L.D?” Pietro asked.

“This is what S.H.I.E.L.D is supposed to be.” Steph said proudly.

Pietro looked back at the helicarrier, “This is not so bad.”

“Let’s load ‘em up.” Stephanie ordered.
The Battle of Sokovia Part 2 and Aftermath

The hordes of civilians running to the safety of the lifeboats was another reminder to Steph of why she kept this job. Captain America was made to protect people, not countries, and that was something she would continue to do until her dying breath.

“I got about fifty to a hundred more coming after this group!” She shouted to the pilot as she directed everyone to the entry doors. She ran back to her other groups waiting for her in makeshift shelters, and instructed Wanda and Pietro to split the groups in different directions to fill the boats as quickly as possible.

“Thor, I’ve got a plan.” Tony said over the comm.

“We’re out of time. They’re coming for the core.” Thor alerted them.

“Rhodey, get the rest of the people on board that carrier.”

“On it.”

“Avengers, time to work for a living.” Tony ordered.

Stephanie and the twins ran to the rendezvous point at the church, where the only thing keeping them afloat was under siege. She snuck up on a few robots outside of it and took them out with a few swings.

“Romanoff,” Tony said, “You and Banner better not be playing ‘hide the zucchini.’”

“Relax, shellhead. Not all of us can fly.” Natasha replied. Stephanie could only imagine the quips waiting for her when she was reunited with her man.

Natasha ran in soon after, “What’s the drill?”

“This is the drill.” Tony pointed to the literal drill of solid metal embedded in the ground, “If Ultron gets his hands on the core, we lose.”

Once Hulk rejoined the group, they were a full team. Then, Ultron appeared from the sky.

“Is that the best you can do?!” Thor taunted.

With a wave of his hand, Ultron summoned all of his hundreds of bodies to the fight.

“You had to ask.” Stephanie said monotonously.

“This is the best I can do.” Ultron responded, “This is exactly what I wanted. All of you against all of me. How can you possibly hope to stop me?”

“Well...like the old woman said,” Tony looked at Stephanie, “Together.”

The clinking robot army charged at them in waves as they surrounded the drill. Everyone did what they could to keep the enemies at bay. Stephanie knocked them to pieces with her shield, and those that came too close got their heads ripped off as she squeezed them in her grip. Thor swatted them away with his hammer. Tony blasted his targets one right after the other. Hulk crushed them and ripped them apart with his bare hands. Clint and Natasha shot at the airborne ones that tried to fly over them. Stephanie avoided a direct incoming hit by jumping in a spinning flip. Wanda’s
telekinesis tore them apart by the bolts, while Pietro knocked out dozens in fractions of a second.

Vision set his eyes on Ultron himself, defending the core from him while the rest of the team was occupied. A bright beam emerged from the gem on his forehead which struck Ultron and kept him down on the gravel. Thor and Tony joined in with their own rays of lightning and energy. The combined power melted the side of Ultron’s face, showing him that they could overpower him. Once they weakened him, Ultron tried to speak.

“You know, with the benefit of hindsight-” Hulk knocked him into the clouds before he could finish that sentence. The remaining bots that saw this tried to flee.

“They’re trying to leave the city.” Thor warned.

“We can’t let them, not even one.” Tony said, “Rhodey!”

“On it.” Rhodey confirmed over the comm. Stephanie smiled, wishing that she had known about Rhodey sooner so he could have joined the team the first time around. Vision went to help him with finishing off those trying to escape.

“We gotta move out.” Stephanie ordered the rest of the team. “Even I can tell the air is getting thin. You guys get to the boats. I’ll sweep for stragglers. Be right behind ya.”

“What about the core?” Clint asked. After all, one of the last robots could still try to deactivate it.

“I’ll protect it.” Wanda stepped up. Clint and Stephanie looked at her in worry, but Steph didn’t stop her. Wanda was a soldier now, and Stephanie knew now that sometimes she had to let the ones she cared about make their own hard calls. Clint and Natasha took off on their own while Stephanie did what she said she would.

The last few people were scattered throughout the marketplace, and Stephanie alerted them that this was the last call for the lifeboats. Most of the robots were gone, so they had no reason to be afraid to come out of hiding.

“Is this the last of them?” Thor asked.

“Yeah, everyone else is on the carrier.” Stephanie said.

“You know, if this works…” Tony said, “...we maybe don’t walk away.”

“Maybe not.” Thor agreed.

Stephanie felt a sudden lump in her throat at that thought. Yes, she knew she would never want to stop helping people, even it meant throwing away a life with her family to do it, but she prayed she wouldn’t have to.

She turned to look at the city one last time and saw Clint out in the streets instead of on a lifeboat, reaching for the last boy trapped in a garbage pile. Suddenly, a flood of heavy fire fell from above, and her first reaction was to cover herself. The stream of quinjet bullets came at a velocity that forced her to the ground.

When the bullet storm ended, she got up and looked for Clint, but instead she found Pietro standing there, ridden with holes that soaked his shirt in blood. He tottered for a few moments before collapsing. Her heart shattered like glass, and the tears flowed beyond her control as she ran to him. Next to his body was Clint and the boy, safe and protected by his sacrifice. Stephanie checked his pulse futilely, and looked at his blue eyes that had lost their light. Her face turned to stone as she
gently picked up his body. This was not the youngest corpse she’d held in her arms, but it never got easier to lose her soldiers, mostly because she saw that as more than just her teammates. They were also her family.

She carried his body to the last lifeboat and handed him off to the medics, although she knew there was nothing they could do for him. She took one last sweep of the empty city, seeing and hearing nothing, until the ground beneath her cracked loudly as it was about to give out. She quickly leaped onto the carrier and held onto the edge. Her racing heart pounded even faster when she remembered the one person still down there.

“Wanda!” She cried out loudly, reaching her hand towards the falling city. The tears in her eyes blinded her, and the blood rushed to her face until she couldn’t breathe. Losing one was hard enough, but losing both of them? That was too much to bear. She backed herself against the railing, holding her mouth to keep her sobs quiet. She shut her eyes tightly, holding them closed until they went numb.

When she opened them again, it was like a miracle appeared before her. Vision floated to the ship, with Wanda clutching to him tightly. Stephanie shot up and pulled Wanda into a tight embrace.

“Wanda, I’m so sorry…” Stephanie sobbed terribly, “Pietro…”

“I know.” Wanda answered in a low mournful voice, allowing herself to cry into Stephanie’s chest. Stephanie kept holding her as shattering blast rang out, and they both looked out to watch the city disintegrate into dust and fall back down to earth and pour into the sea.

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“The rules have changed.” Stephanie stated as she, Tony, and Thor walked down the hallways of the new facility in Upstate New York.

“We’re dealing with something new.” Tony added.

“Well The Vision is artificial intelligence.” Stephanie noted.

“A machine.” Tony jumped off of that.

“So it doesn’t count.” Stephanie concluded.

“No, it’s not like a person lifting the hammer.” Tony agreed.

“Right! Different rules for us.” Stephanie gestured to Tony.


“Thank you.” Stephanie appreciated that Tony got the point.

“He can wield the hammer. He can keep the Mind Stone. It’s safe with The Vision,” Thor stated, “And these days, safe is in short supply.”

Stephanie pondered for a moment, “...but if you put the hammer in an elevator-”

“It would still go up.” Tony finished her thought.

“Elevator’s not worthy.” Stephanie shook her head. One day, they’d figure out the mystery of Mjolnir.
“I’m going to miss these little talks of ours.” Thor patted Tony’s shoulder.

“Not if you don’t leave.” Tony said in a soft plea.

“I have no choice.” Thor explained, continuing down the hallway and out the exit, “The Mind Stone is the fourth of the Infinity Stones to show up in the last few years. It’s not a coincidence. Someone has been playing an intricate game and has made pawns of us, and once all these pieces are in position—"

“Triple Yatzhee?” Tony suggested.

“You think you can find out what’s coming?” Stephanie asked.

“I do.” Thor answered and patted Tony’s chest, “Besides this one, there’s nothing that can’t be explained.”

With a final nod goodbye, Thor lifted his hammer in the air and a beam of multi-colored lights took him out of sight, leaving a scorched symbol behind in the grass.

“That man has no regard for lawn maintenance.” Tony said, turning around, “I’m gonna miss him, though, and you’re gonna miss me. There’s gonna be a lot of tears, which isn’t odd for you, I know.”

Stephanie laughed, “I will miss you, Tony.”

“Yeah?” Tony’s face lit up into a smile at those words, “Well, it’s time for me to tap out. Maybe I should take a page out of Barton’s book. Build a farm, hope no one blows it up. Maybe that’ll get Pepper’s attention back.”

“What?” Stephanie did a double take at that last part, “Tony, did she-?”

“Yeah.” Tony looked away and pressed his shades closer to his face, “A couple weeks after Sokovia, she...stopped by to visit. She was happy to see I was alive, but...not so happy to hear how much of it was my fault...”

“I’m sorry, I didn’t know.” Stephanie held her close to her chest.

“In her defense, I’m a handful.” Tony faked a smile, “But it’s okay. She still takes my calls, but the truth is...my work here...with you...it means too much for me to let go.”

Stephanie’s muscles shivered and her heart pounded as he looked like he had more to say.

“Stephanie...can you...stay?” Tony pulled off his sunglasses and faced her directly, “I need...I need to figure out what I really want, and it would mean a lot to me if you helped.”

“Tony, I...” Stephanie teared up, and the secret inside of her was finally forcing it’s way out, “I can’t.”

“Why?” Tony asked, “What do you need out there that you can’t find here?”

“I have to find him.” She wiped her tears away, “I have to find the Winter Soldier.”

“The psycho who almost killed you last year?” Tony was confused how he came into this, “Stephanie, he can’t hurt you here. If he’s coming after you, we can-”

“He’s my husband, Tony!” Stephanie let it out, “His name is Bucky Barnes, the Bucky Barnes, and he’s still out there...and he needs me.”
Tony stepped back a bit and tucked his sunglasses into his shirt, blowing air out as he processed the news.

“But he was supposed to be d-” Tony started.

“He survived, almost like how I did. Some serum and some freezing...and now he’s here.” Stephanie watched his face, still fearful that she’d get the negative reaction she dreaded.

“Okay, so…” Tony threw his hand out, “Here’s what we’re going to do. We’re going to go back inside, and you’re going to fill me in on everything that you know about what happened to SGT. Sweetheart. That way, I will be able to do my part in helping you find your long lost Ken doll.”

Stephanie lost her breath in her relief and went weak in the knees.

“Also, I’m gonna need you to stop crying before you start to make me cry.” Tony added.

She wiped her cheeks dry, “Thank you, Tony.”

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Stephanie found Natasha in the catwalk above the training grounds.

“You want to keep staring at the wall, or do you want to go to work?” She nodded her head, “I mean, it’s a pretty interesting wall.”

“I thought you and Tony were still gazing into each other’s eyes, Captain Rogers.” Natasha said cheekishly.

“Ah-ah, that’s Captain Barnes.” Stephanie looked at her with a knowing smile as she turned to head back to the training grounds.

Natasha crossed her arms and followed behind her, “It’s about time you told him.”

“Better late than never.” Stephanie pulled out her IPad with the newest members’ stats on it, “As long as he doesn’t find out he was literally the last to know.”

Natasha pulled the IPad from Steph’s hands, “How do we look?”

“Well, we’re not the ‘27 Yankees.” Stephanie pursed her lip.

“We have some hitters.” Natasha said as she went over everyone’s files.

“They’re good,” Stephanie cocked her head, “They’re not a team.”

“Let’s beat ‘em into shape.” Natasha said.

Stephanie pushed open the training room’s doors and took a good look at the new official Avengers: War Machine, The Vision, The Falcon, and the Scarlet Witch.

“Avengers…” She called out, “...Assemble!”
Stephanie assigned Falcon to the rooftop and Black Widow and Scarlet Witch to blend in at the café while she remained hidden in an empty apartment building across from the police station.

“Alright, what do you see?” Stephanie asked over the comm as she peeked out the window. Wanda had only recently worked her way up to field practice, but Stephanie expected her to be as competent as any agent.

“Standard beat cops, small station, quiet street.” Wanda reported, “It’s a good target.”

“There’s an ATM on the south corner, which means?” Stephanie quizzed her.

“Cameras.” Wanda answered correctly.

“Both cross-streets are one-way.”

“So compromised escape routes.” Wanda noted.

“Means our guy doesn’t care about being seen and he isn’t afraid to make a mess on the way out.” Stephanie explained as she looked over recent newspapers with Brock Rumlow’s picture making the front page, detailing how the former S.H.I.E.L.D and Hydra agent was buying high-grade weapons and robbing police stations of their ammo, “You see that Range Rover halfway up the block?”

“Yeah, the red one? It’s cute.” Wanda fiddled with her coffee mug.

“It’s also bulletproof which means private security which means more guns, which means more headaches for somebody, probably us.” Natasha added, sitting at the table behind Wanda’s.

“You guys know I can move things with my mind, right?” Wanda sipped her drink.

“Looking over your shoulder needs to become second nature.” Natasha smiled at her.

“Anybody ever tell you you’re a little paranoid?” Sam asked as he walked along the roof’s edge looking over the street.

“Not to my face. Why, did you hear something?”

“Eyes on target, folks.” Stephanie ordered, “This is the best lead we’ve had on Rumlow in six months. I don’t want to lose him.”

As eager as she was to catch Rumlow and throw him in prison, she was less eager for the below-the-belt banter that would obviously come out of his mouth the moment she confronted him. He may have become a professional killer, but she doubted he had a professional attitude.

“Huh,” Sam sneered, “If he sees us coming, that won’t be a problem. He kind of hates us.”

Stephanie bit her tongue. Natasha already knew, and Wanda may have found out when probing her mind, but she didn’t know if Sam knew that she had slept with Rumlow once, when he was her trusted comrade in command of S.T.R.I.K.E. It was one of her biggest regrets that would haunt her for as long as Rumlow lived. She put all that out of her mind when she heard honking and shouting at a truck forcing its way along the street.

“Sam, see that garbage truck? Tag it.” She instructed.
Sam sent a small drone out of his wingpack to follow the truck and hover underneath it. He ordered it to give an X-ray scan to see what was inside.

“That truck’s loaded for max weight, and the driver’s armed.” Sam reported.

“It’s a battering ram.” Natasha said.

“Go now.” Stephanie ordered calmly.

“What?” Wanda was thrown off guard.

“He’s not hitting the police.” Stephanie explained as she rushed out of the apartment and towards the more important facility in the city, the Institute for Infectious Diseases. Sam picked her up to fly her there while Natasha and Wanda went on foot. By the time she landed, his trucks had already broken into the place and the terrorists had invaded the facility. She blocked the gunfire with her shield and kicked the side of a truck into the gunman. She threw the shield at another and kicked a third in the chest into the side of the building.

She kneeled on top of the truck and reported, “Body armor. AR-15’s. I make seven hostiles.”

Sam landed on the second floor walkway and took out two more on bridge, “I make five.”

Wanda flew in and made a force field to block the gunfire from another hostile hiding behind one of the vehicles, she focuses the energy to squeeze him in a tight grip of a red glow and lifted him high enough for Sam to knock him out with his wing.

“Four.”

The drone joined them and did a scan of the entire building.

“Rumlow’s on the third floor.” Sam said.

“Wanda, just like we practiced.” Stephanie made a running start.

“What about the gas?” Wanda asked as she waved her hands to make a grip around Steph’s body.

“Get it out.” Stephanie jumped forward and Wanda levitated her high enough to throw her through the third floor window, where she rolled in and knocked out the guard near her by pulling off his gas mask and kicking him into the wall. She hid behind one of the wall support beams as gunfire came her way. With the right angles, she was able to throw her shield to bounce off the supports and knock the hostile in the head. The next guy who came towards her got knocked off his feet and thrown against the support beam. Once the area was clear, she headed for the guarded laboratory, where she found the containment chamber already broken. The small incubator inside was left wide open, and the specimen inside was gone.

“Rumlow has a biological weapon.” Stephanie reported.

“I’m on it.” Natasha responded immediately and set off after Rumlow herself.

Stephanie ran to assist her, but by the time she found an exit window, she saw Rumlow in what the papers called his Crossbones armor, with a helmet that showed only his rough eyes. He sat behind a loaded anti-aircraft machine gun that was aimed right at her. She could only shield herself before he fired at her. The blow threw her back into the building and hit the corner of the ceiling, leaving a crater on the wall. As she got up, she knew he wasn’t going to stop there. She ran along the side of the building as a trail of explosions followed behind her until he caught up and blasted her out of the window. She grunted as she fell to the lower roof a couple stories down, hitting her back on the
concrete.

“Sam…” She choked up as she twisted her aching bones around, “He’s in an AFV heading north.”

Everyone made their own way, following behind the obvious green truck zooming through the streets carelessly towards the marketplace. Running made it easier for Stephanie to work off the pain from the explosion.

“I’ve got four, they’re splitting up.” Sam said, as he was the first to make it to the square.

“I’ve got the two on the left.” Natasha said the moment she arrived on motorcycle.

By the time Stephanie had arrived, she had no sight of the targets, but she saw a crowd gathered around a pile of their vests and weapons.

“They ditched their gear. It’s a shell game now.” She stood up and looked around cautiously, “One of them has the payload.”

Suddenly a small explosive device landed on her shield and beeped rhythmically, so she threw it in the air before the blast could touch anyone. Then, a powerful punch in the back knocked her forward while she was distracted. She crashed through a market stand and rolled in the dirt.

“There you are, you bitch.” Rumlow’s gravely voice growled at her, “I’ve been waiting for this!”

His mechanized gauntlet punched her in the chest as she tried to stand, throwing her into the tables of a cafe. She rolled back on her feet before he could stomp on her, and deflected his powerful punches with her arm. She’d seen him fight so many times before that she could predict which way his fists would fly next and struck him against the cheek of his mask. This however, only angered him and he struck ten times harder and caught her with an uppercut that knocked her off her feet once more. She crouched and aimed low, striking his gut and his ribs while ducking his high punches. When their arms locked, they pushed against each other.

“This is for dropping a building on my face.” He rasped as a long hidden blade popped out of his gauntlet. She barely dodged the blade as he hit the wall and crushed the concrete behind them. Luckily, his arm was stuck long enough for her to grab his elbow and twist it. Rumlow groaned in pain as Stephanie kicked him back, slipping the bladed gauntlet off of his hand and throwing it to the ground.

Rumlow came back with a second blade projected from his other arm, and swung at her swiftly. She ducked each time until she could grab his arm and kick him in the face, sending him flying across the tables himself.

As she marched towards him, he got on his knees and pulled his helmet off. She grabbed shoulders of his armor and pulled him towards herself. For the first time, she saw his real face since the Triskelion, or at least the charred remains of it. His skin had been cooked all the way to his ears, which were misshapen liked pork rinds. His oily dark hair still remained slicked back.

“I think I look pretty good, all things considered.” Rumlow made eyes at her.

“Who’s your buyer?” Stephanie made no time for games, she just shook him as she interrogated him.

“You know he knew you.” Rumlow smiled as he panted, “Your beau, your hubby, your Bucky.”

Stephanie held him up closer to her, her muscles freezing as she squeezed him tighter, “What did you say?”
“He remembered you.” Rumlow explained, taunting her, “I was there. He got all weepy about it, and I hadn’t even told him about how good I was fucking your sweet ass with him gone. I wish I’d told him how you sucked my dick while they put his brain back in a blender.”

Stephanie loosened her grip as she listened to him in horror. Tears glazed over her eyes.

“He wanted you to know something. He said to me...Please tell Steph, when you gotta go, you gotta go…” The smile dropped from his face, “…and you’re coming with me.”

Stephanie finally came back to her senses when she heard the click of a detonator. She backed away as the bombs on Rumlow’s vest activated and engulfed him in flames. She would have been caught in the blast too if Wanda hadn’t contained him in that split second they went off.

Wanda concentrated hard to keep the explosion contained, and tried to move the blast away from them by sending it into the air. Suddenly, her strength gave out, and the energy shield disappeared before she could get it far away enough. The resulting explosion hit the nearby building on the top floors, blowing out the walls and windows and bursting the offices inside into flames.

Wanda and Stephanie looked on in horror. Stephanie’s voice was heavy as she called Sam for fire and rescue.

“We gotta get up there.” She told Wanda, trying to remain calm for her, but she could see that Wanda knew what she’d just done, and nothing was going to be the same for her.
The Sokovia Accords

“Eleven Wakandans were among those killed during a confrontation between the Avengers and a group of mercenaries in Lagos, Nigeria, last month. The traditionally reclusive Wakandans were on an outreach mission in Lagos when the attack occurred.”

Stephanie’s whole body drooped as she sat in Tony’s desk chair. She’d come to look at some files, but when she turned on the TV, she found the news replaying same clips they’d shown over the past few weeks before getting to the press conference with the Wakandan monarch, King T’Chaka. She had first heard of the country back in World War II, and the only thing she knew about it was it had vibranium and wouldn’t let anyone else get near it. She didn’t want to know what Howard had to do to get the little he used to make her shield.

“Our people’s blood is spilled on foreign soil, not only because of the actions of criminals, but by the indifference of those pledged to stop them. Victory at the expense of the innocent is no victory at all.”

Stephanie clenched her jaw. With all due respect to the king, who was he to say that she was indifferent? She felt every one of those deaths in Sokovia, and in New York, and in Germany, and in France, and in Italy, and in every country she fought for innocent people. She would concede that what happened at Lagos was no victory, but it would have been bigger loss if they hadn’t been there to do their jobs.

She turned off the TV, but still heard a slight murmur of a different station coming from another room. She immediately got up and looked for Wanda, and found her glued to the TV in her own room. Stephanie’s heart sank. The last thing the poor girl needed was another guilt trip for the same damn thing she’d been hearing for the whole month, that it was her fault, and that she had no business being there. It was Stephanie who had given her clearance to be on that mission, and if Rumlow hadn’t incinerated himself to ashes, he would be the one who would rightfully receive the blame. Stephanie turned off her TV, too.

“It’s my fault.” Wanda said quietly, with her voice shaking.

“That’s not true.” Stephanie said matter of factly, with her arms folded as she stood in the doorway.

“Turn the TV back on.” Wanda rested her head on her fist, “They’re being very specific.”

“I should’ve clocked that bomb vest long before you had to deal with it.” Stephanie walked over to join Wanda on her bed, “Rumlow said ‘Bucky’ and… all of a sudden I was a sixteen-year-old kid again, in Brooklyn…”

Stephanie was still infuriated with herself for letting his taunts get to her. All those awful things he said, whether they were true or not, were just a distraction, and she fell right for it, “...And people died. It’s on me.”

“It’s on both of us.” Wanda muttered. At least now she wasn’t taking all the blame.

“This job…” Stephanie wrapped an arm around Wanda’s shoulder, “We try to save as many people as we can. Sometimes, that doesn’t mean everybody. But if we can’t find a way to live with that, then next time...maybe nobody gets saved.”

Stephanie knew who they were both thinking about. Pietro died saving his own people, and he wouldn’t want her to give up the good she was doing for other people.
Suddenly, Vision phased through the wall and interrupted them.

“Viz, we talked about this.” Wanda sighed in frustration.

“Yes, but the door was open, so I assumed…” Vision trailed off when he realized he wasn’t making things better, “Captain Rogers wished to know when Mr. Stark was arriving.”

“Thank you.” Stephanie said politely, “We’ll be right down.”

“I’ll…use the door.” Vision corrected himself, “Oh, and apparently, he’s brought a guest.”

“We know who it is?”

“The Secretary of State.”

“Five years ago, I had a heart attack and dropped right in the middle of my backswing.” Secretary Thaddeus Ross moved his arms in a golfing motion in what was obviously an anecdote to warm them up to some bad news, “Turned out it was the best round of my life because after thirteen hours of surgery and a triple bypass, I found something 40 years in the Army never taught me. Perspective.”

The team stared at Secretary Ross in anticipation for where this lecture was leading.

“The world owes the Avengers an unpayable debt.” Now he was buttering them up before knocking them down, “You have fought for us, protected us, risked your lives, but while a great many people see you as heroes, there are some…who would prefer the word ‘vigilantes.’”

“And what word would you use, Mr. Secretary?” Natasha asked to get more to a point.

“How about dangerous?” He finally dropped the pretenses, “What would you call a group of US-based, enhanced individuals, who routinely ignore sovereign borders and inflict their will wherever they choose, and who, frankly, seem unconcerned about what they leave behind?”

Ross pulled up a series of footage on the monitor. It was the same incidents they’d been blamed for, but this time, the footage wasn’t edited to be tame enough for television. This was unreleased uncut graphic footage of destruction and dying while people struggled to scramble to safety.

“New York.”

“Washington, D.C.”

“Sokovia.”

“Lagos.”

And once again, he played the footage of the building explosion in front of Wanda, who hadn’t done anything but blame herself until Stephanie got through to her. As she watched her face, she saw the talk they had just disappear from her mind.

“Okay, that’s enough.” Stephanie said firmly.

“For the past four years, you’ve operated with unlimited power and no supervision. That’s an arrangement the governments of the world can no longer tolerate, but I think we have a solution.”
Ross placed a thick binded documents onto the table.

“The Sokovia Accords. Approved by 117 countries, it states that the Avengers will no longer be a private organization. Instead, they’ll operate under the supervision of a United Nations panel, only when and if that panel deems it necessary.”

Stephanie spoke up, “The Avengers were formed to make the world a safer place. I feel we’ve done that.”

“Tell me, Captain,” Ross asked, “Do you know where Thor and Banner are right now? If I misplaced a couple of 30 megaton nukes, you can bet there’d be consequences. Compromise, reassurance, that’s how the world works. Believe me, this is the middle ground.”

“So…” Rhodey clarified, “There are contingencies.”

“Three days from now, the UN meets in Vienna to ratify the Accords,” Ross explained, “Talk it over.”

“And if we come to a decision you don’t like?” Natasha asked.

“Then you retire.” Ross stated.

“Secretary Ross has a Congressional Medal of Honor, which is one more than you have,” Rhodey argued. Of course he respected ranks, even if he was the only one who did. While they talked it over, Stephanie skimmed the stuffing of the Accords to find anything that would justify her mistrust of it.

“So let’s say we agree to this thing,” Sam asked, “How long is it gonna be before they LoJack us like a bunch of common criminals?”

“117 countries want to sign this. 117, Sam, and you’re just like ‘Nah, it’s cool, we got it.’”

“How long are you gonna play both sides?”

“I have an equation.” Vision entered the conversation.

“Oh, this will clear it up.” Sam said sarcastically, but Stephanie looked at Vision attentively.

“In the eight years that Mr. Stark announced himself as Iron Man, the number of known enhanced persons has grown exponentially, and during the same period, the number of potentially world-ending events has risen at a commensurate rate.” Vision said.

“Are you saying it’s our fault?” Stephanie asked.

“I’m saying there may be a causality.” Vision clarified, “Our very strength invites challenge. Challenge incites conflict, and conflict...breeds catastrophe. Oversight...Oversight is not an idea that can be dismissed out of hand.”

“Boom.” Rhodey said victoriously.

“Tony…” Natasha addressed him as he kept his face hidden in his palm, “You’re being uncharacteristically non-hypervocal.”

“It’s because he’s already made up his mind.” Stephanie explained coldly.
“Boy, you know me so well.” Tony pulled himself off the couch and towards the kitchenette, “Actually, I’m nursing an electromagnetic headache. That’s what’s going on Cap, it’s just pain. It’s discomfort.”

Tony took a look down the sink, “Who’s putting coffee grounds in the disposal? Am I running a bed and breakfast for a biker gang?”

He moved a basket of onions to the bar to hold up his phone, which he tapped on to activate the holographic screen of a young man’s photo, “Oh, that’s Charles Spencer, by the way. He’s a great kid. Computer engineering degree, 3.6 GPA, had a floor-level gig at Intel planned for the fall, but first he wanted to put a few miles on his soul before he parked it behind a desk. See the world. Maybe be of service. Charlie didn’t want to go to Vegas or Ft. Lauderdale, which is what I would do. He didn’t go to Paris or Amsterdam, which seems fun. He decided to spend his summer building sustainable housing for the poor. Guess where. Sokovia. He wanted to make a difference, I suppose. We won’t know because we dropped a building on him while we were kicking ass.”

Stephanie turned her head and blinked her tears away.

“There’s no decision making process here,” Tony moved in front of the holograph, “There’s no decision-making process here. We need to be put in check. Whatever form that takes, I’m game. If we can’t accept limitations, if we’re boundary-less, we’re no better than the bad guys.”

If only it were that simple. Stephanie gently responded, “Tony, if someone dies on your watch, you don’t give up.”

“Who said we’re giving up?” Tony snapped back quickly.

“We are if we’re not taking responsibility for our actions. This document just shifts the blame.” Stephanie said.

“I’m sorry, Steph,” Rhodey interrupted, “That is dangerously arrogant. This is the United Nations we’re talking about. It’s not the World Security Council, it’s not S.H.I.E.L.D, it’s not Hydra…”

“No, but it’s run by people with agendas, and agendas change!” Stephanie asserted. She no longer trusted organizations just by their label alone.

“That’s good! That’s why I’m here,” Tony walked closer to her seat, “When I realized what my weapons were capable of in the wrong hands, I shut it down and stopped manufacturing.”

“Tony, you chose to do that,” Stephanie repeated her point, “If we sign this, we surrender our right to choose! What if this panel sends us somewhere we don’t think we should go? What if there’s somewhere we need to go, and they don’t let us? We may not be perfect, but the safest hands are still our own.”

“If we don’t do this now,” Tony lowered his tone, “It’s going to be done to us later. That’s the fact. That won’t be pretty.”

“You’re saying they’ll come for me.” Wanda stated sadly.

“We would protect you.” Vision beat Stephanie to it.

“Maybe Tony’s right.” Natasha said, which made everyone silent, including Stephanie, “If we have one hand on the wheel, we can still steer. If we take it off-”

“Aren’t you the same woman who told the government to kiss her ass a few years ago?” Sam spoke
“I’m just…” Natasha took the floor back, “I’m reading the terrain. We have made some very public mistakes. We need to win their trust back.”

“Focus up, I’m sorry. Did I just mishear you, or did you agree with me?” Tony said.

“Oh, I want to take it back now.”

“Ah-ah, no, you can’t retract it.” Tony tried to lighten the mood, “Thank you. Unprecedented.”

Stephanie’s phone buzzed in her pocket which took her attention away from the whole debacle. The number was international, from England, specifically. It took her half a second to read the text the first time. Then she read it again, more slowly. She read it again, and again, until the words sunk into her.

*She’s gone. In her sleep.*

Peggy Carter was dead.

“Okay, case closed. I win.” Tony chimed to officially end the debate.

“I have to go…” Stephanie rushed out, already sniffling before she could leave the room. She collapsed in tears on the staircase outside.
Peggy's Funeral

Stephanie knew that this was the best she could have hoped for Peggy. A long and meaningful life, a loving family, and a peaceful death. What made her cry was that she had missed it all. She was the only woman Stephanie had ever truly loved, and she had only gotten to know her for two years. She wore a conservative black dress with a blazer and black gloves and pinned her hair into a neat bun. The Carter-Sousas allowed her to volunteer as a pallbearer, so she carried her best girl one last time in her coffin adorned with the Union Jack.

People from all over the world spilled out of the English cathedral and lined the streets to pay their respects to the woman who sacrificed so much to keep people safe and free. Most people remained calm and poised for the ceremony. Stephanie had tried to get all her tears out before the funeral itself, but a few slipped out as she heard the young boys’ choir sing their angelic hymns.

Once they brought her before the altar, Stephanie took a seat next to Sam, who lent her a handkerchief to dry her eyes. The minister began with the traditional mass which was a blur to Stephanie until he came to the eulogy.

“And now I would like to invite Sharon Carter to come up and say a few words.” He said.

Sam nudged Stephanie’s shoulder when he saw who it was. It took her a few seconds to recognize her former neighbor, Agent 13, who she had known as Kate. It looked like this woman had yet another surprise for her.

“Margaret Carter was known to most as a founder of S.H.I.E.L.D, but I just knew her as Aunt Peggy.” She revealed, “She had a photograph in her office. Aunt Peggy standing next to JFK. As a kid, that was pretty cool, but it was a lot live up to, which is why I never told anyone we were related.”

Stephanie smiled lightly. A woman who wanted to be judged by her merit alone; she was definitely Peggy’s kin.

“I asked her once how she managed to master diplomacy and espionage in a time when no one wanted to succeed at either. She said...Compromise where you can, but where you can’t, don’t. Even if everyone is telling you that something wrong is something right. Even if the whole world is telling you to move, it is your duty to plant yourself like a tree, look them in the eye and say ‘No, you move.’”

Stephanie swallowed painfully as the crying started once again. She wished she had been around to hear more of Peggy’s wisdom from her own mouth. She wanted to visit more often towards the end of her life, but it killed her to make Peggy cry over and over again every time she learned that Stephanie was still alive.

Once the service was over, Stephanie stayed behind to have some quiet time in the church, even Sam waited outside. It finally sank in how alone she was. However, Natasha surprised her by showing up at her side to interrupt her solitude.

“When I came out of the ice...” Stephanie explained, “I thought everyone I had known was gone. Then I found out she was alive...I was just lucky to have her.”

“She had you back, too.” Natasha comforted her. Stephanie’s breath struggled. There was only one person from her past still alive, the one she loved the most, and she couldn’t let any country take him
away from her, too.

“Who else signed?” Stephanie asked hesitantly.

“Tony, Rhodey, Vision.” Natasha listed them off. Stephanie wasn’t surprised, all of them had supported the Accords from the beginning.

“Clint?”

“Says he’s retired.”

“Wanda?”

“TBD.”

Stephanie was relieved. At least Wanda was still being cautious. Both of them had signed their lives away once, so it was good that she knew better than to rush into this.

“I’m off to Vienna for the signing of the Accords. There’s plenty of room on the jet.” Natasha invited her. Stephanie just sighed as her rejection.

“Just because it’s the path of least resistance doesn’t mean it’s the wrong path. Staying together is more important than how we stay together.” Natasha tried to convince her.

Stephanie didn’t believe that, so she countered, “What are we giving up to do it?”

Natasha didn’t have a direct answer for her, but she could tell she was getting frustrated with her.

“I’m sorry, Nat.” Stephanie shook her head, “I can’t sign it.”

“I know.” Natasha sounded defeated.

“Well, then what are you doing here?” Stephanie asked.

“I didn’t want you to be alone.” Natasha said, opening her arms to initiate a hug, which was usually Stephanie’s job. Stephanie gave in and wrapped her arms around her, and made her shoulders damp.

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After Natasha left, Stephanie went to find Sharon Carter, one of her few remaining connections to Peggy. She wanted to hear all about Peggy as an aunt and a mentor.

“My mom tried to talk me out of enlisting, but not Aunt Peggy. She bought me my first thigh holster.” Sharon recollected as they walked back to her hotel room.

“Very practical.” Stephanie noted.

“And stylish.” Sharon smiled.

“CIA has you stationed over here now?” Stephanie asked, since her former bodyguard had disappeared shortly after the fall of Hydra.

“Berlin.” She clarified, “Joint Terrorism Task Force.”

“Right, right.” Stephanie nodded, “Sounds fun.”

“I know, right?” Sharon chuckled as the conversation died down.
“I’ve been meaning to ask you…” Stephanie brought up, “When you were spying on me from across the hall…”

“You mean when I was doing my job.”

Stephanie blushed a bit as she remembered the uncouth things that occurred in that apartment, “...Did Peggy know?”

“She kept so many secrets.” Sharon shook her head, “I didn’t want her to have one from you.”

Stephanie looked to the side. Apparently, that meant no. Now, she would never know.

“Steph!” Sam rushed in and interrupted them, “There’s something you gotta see.”
“A bomb hidden in a news van ripped through the UN building in Vienna. More than 70 people have been injured. At least 12 are dead, including Wakanda’s King T’Chaka.”

Stephanie’s heart palpitated as she watched the news with a cold face. The Accords were supposed to prevent this kind of thing from happening, and it didn’t even make it past the signing.

“Officials have released a video of a suspect who they have identified as James Buchanan Barnes, the Winter Soldier.”

The rest of the report faded out in Stephanie’s ears, drowned out by the sound of her heartbeat. No, Bucky couldn’t have done this. Not unless someone forced him to. That’s how the Winter Soldier worked. If he was being used for terroristic violence, that meant that he and countless others were in danger.

“I have to go to work.” Sharon sighed as she got off the phone with her fellow CIA agents. Before anyone drew any erroneous conclusions, her team had to find out the truth of what happened.

They all changed quickly out of their Sunday best and into their plainer and more inconspicuous clothing. Sharon took off to meet with the CIA while Stephanie and Sam blended into the crowd until they could make their next move. Meanwhile, Stephanie called Natasha, who she knew had been in that building.

“Yeah?” Her gravely voice picked up on the other line. Stephanie was more than just relieved.

“You all right?” Stephanie asked, even though by picking up she knew that she was.

“Uh, yeah, thanks. I got lucky…” Natasha lingered for a while, so Stephanie knew that she was aware of who they were accusing, “I know how much your husband means to you. I really do...Stay home. You’ll only make this worse, for all of us. Please”

Stephanie almost dropped her phone. Natasha was one of the smartest women she knew, so how could she say that to her? Did the explosion make her forget who she was talking to?

“Are you saying you’ll arrest me?” Stephanie asked with a calm fury.

“No.” Natasha spoke quietly to avoid being overheard, “Someone will. If you interfere. That’s how it works now.”

No shit, that’s what Stephanie had been warning them in the first place.

“If he’s this far gone, Nat,” Stephanie’s tears traveled their usual path, “I should be the one to bring him in.”

“Why?” Natasha asked, knowing that Stephanie couldn’t be neutral about this.

“Because I’m the one least likely to die trying.” Stephanie said before hanging up her cell. Whether he was Bucky or the Winter Soldier, he was made of stronger stuff, and he could take anything they threw at him. That’s why she had to get to him first. Not just because she was his wife, but because she was his equal.

Stephanie strolled into the cafe where Sam had ordered himself a scone at the bar. Sam took one look
at her face and knew it hadn’t gone well.

“She tell you to stay out of it?” Sam asked as he chewed, but Stephanie was too angry to respond, so he added “Might have a point.”

Stephanie squeezed her fist tightly, “He’d do it for me.”

“1945, maybe. I just want to make sure we consider all our options. The people who shoot at you usually wind up shooting at me.” Sam smiled at her, to let her know he was still on her side.

Sharon joined them at the bar with new information, “Tips have been pouring in since that footage went public. Everybody thinks the Winter Soldier goes to their gym. Most of it’s noise, except for this. My boss expects a briefing pretty much now so that’s all the head start you’re gonna get.”

She slid her a manila folder with blurry pictures of him under an assumed name, and a place of residence in Bucharest, Romania.

“Thank you.” Stephanie muttered gratefully.

“And you’re gonna have to hurry. We have orders to shoot on sight.” Sharon warned her before exiting the cafe.

Stephanie had been picking locked doors since she was 14, but never had it been more urgent that this moment. When the door clicked open, she pushed it away to reveal where Bucky had been hiding from her. It was a small studio apartment furnished with a couch, a bookshelf made of planks and cement blocks, tables, a lamp, and a mattress on the floor with dark sheets and blankets. At least he had been trying to live with some comforts. The windows had been plastered with newspapers. The kitchen was filled with pots and pans, and the refrigerator had cookies and chips on top. She was relieved to know he was eating and even indulging in sweet treats now and then. All of this told her that so far, he had been okay, and that her prayers for his safety had been answered.

She found a small worn notebook marked with colored tabs on top of the fridge. She turned the pages to discover it was his diary, and her face lit up with hope when she found he was using her picture as a bookmark. More specifically, he was using a Captain America postcard that matched the mural at her exhibit at the Smithsonian. He had to have recognized her.

“Heads up, Cap,” Sam warned over comm, “German Special Forces, approaching from the south.”

“Understood.” Stephanie had to get her head back on the mission. She couldn’t reminisce now, not when Bucky was so…

She heard steady breathing coming from behind her, which made her jolt to turn around. The love of her life was standing right in front of her, dressed in shabby secondhand clothing with a baseball cap and stubble, watching her cautiously. She wanted to toss her helmet off right in that moment and jump into his arms, but she couldn’t.

“Do you know me?” She asked with a shaking voice even as she stood proudly in her trademark uniform with the shield on her arm.

He paused, but answered, “You’re Stephanie.”

He said her name. For the first time in over seventy years, she got to hear him say her name again.
She wasn’t “the mission,” she wasn’t “Captain America,” and she wasn’t “Captain Rogers.” She was Stephanie.

“I read about you in the museum.” Bucky clarified, as if he didn’t want her to get her hopes up, but it was too late for that.

“They’ve set the perimeter.” Sam warned her.

“I know you’re nervous,” Stephanie slowly approached him, talking sweetly, “and you have plenty of reason to be...but you’re lying.”

“I wasn’t in Vienna. I don’t do that anymore.” Bucky said defensively. Stephanie believed him wholeheartedly.

“They’re entering the building.” Sam became more urgent.

Stephanie was so frustrated that the moment she had been waiting years for was being cut short, so she was going to make it last as long as she could, “Well the people who think you did are coming here now, and they’re not planning on taking you alive.”

“That’s smart.” Bucky sounded like he’d resigned himself to being hunted like prey, “Good strategy.”

Stephanie could hear the footsteps stomping up the stairs.

“They’re on the roof, I’m compromised.”

“This doesn’t have to end in a fight, Buck.” Stephanie just wanted this whole thing to be over as soon as possible so they could prove his innocence and they could finally get back to their life.

Bucky sighed and pulled the glove off of his metal hand, “It always ends in a fight.”

“Five seconds.”

“You pulled me from the river!” Stephanie exclaimed, “Why?”

Bucky looked at her and murmured, “I don’t know.”

“Three seconds.”

“Yes, you do.” Stephanie whispered.

Because you still love me.

“Breach! Breach! Breach!”

A flash grenade crashed through the window, but Stephanie knocked it out of the way. It was a diversion as an explosive grenade came in right after. Bucky kicked it her way so she could cover it with the shield, containing the blast. As the troops tried to bust down the door, bullets shot through the window, and Bucky pulled up his mattress as a shield. Then, he flung his dinner table and lodged it into the entrance hall, barricading the door.

The Task Force burst in through the windows. Bucky knocked one guy out, but another aimed at him. Stephanie literally pulled the kitchen rug from under him and made him slip and fall. As Bucky took out the guys pouring out of the windows, Stephanie covered the back door, pulling the assault rifle in his grip out of the way so Bucky could kick him down.
As Bucky rushed to face the troops outside, Stephanie pulled on his metal arm, “Buck! Stop!”

Bucky quickly flipped around to escape from her grip and met her eyes with his, fuming.

“You’re gonna kill someone.” She warned him to calm down.

He pushed her down harshly and kneeled down beside her, his metal fist raised in the air. She was too shocked to react. Thankfully, he punched the wooden floor next to her to grab a backpack from under the boards.

“I’m not gonna kill anyone.” He said. He pulled the backpack out and threw it out the window while still keeping his eyes locked on her.

When more soldiers came in firing at them, Bucky jumped in front of her and blocked their bullets with his metal arm. Then she jumped and covered them both with her shield, putting her arm around him. When more men crawled in from the back. He shoved her in their direction while he caught the bullets from the front. As the soldier approached him, he grabbed him and threw him into the planks of his bookshelf. Then he grabbed the cinderblock and threw it into the next guy who tried to come near him.

The Task Force finally burst down the door, so now Bucky had no choice but to take out every guy on the way out. He grabbed the battering ram and swung it at the approaching soldiers. By the time Stephanie made it out of the apartment, he was already leaping down the staircase. She heard one soldier reporting to his superior over his radio, so she grabbed it and crushed it with her bare hand, much to his confoundment. She followed Bucky down the stairs and caught the guy he had just thrown over the rail.

“C’mon, hun.” She rebuked him. He wasn’t making this any easier for the shitshow she was going to return to. He just stared back at her defiantly as he elbowed another guy in the face.

Stephanie continued to distract and fight off the remaining troops while Bucky jumped and pulled the rails to drop him several floors below. From there, he disappeared into the hallway and hopefully out the window. Once she got to the balcony, she spotted him on the roof of the next building, facing an opponent in an all-black suit. The figure had Bucky on the ropes, so she gave herself a running start to go and rescue him.

“Sam, southwest rooftop!” She ordered.

“Who the hell’s the other guy?”

“About to find out.” She charged forward and leaped off the balcony to the rooftop several yards away.

Right as she landed, a helicopter came their way with a flurry of bullets. The black feline-suited man was impervious to bullets it seemed, so that wasn’t just any ordinary suit. Bucky, however, was still vulnerable, so that had to be taken care of.

“Sam.” Stephanie didn’t have to say another word.

“Got him.” Sam flew by and kicked the tail rotor, knocking it off course.

Bucky used the distraction to flee from the strange man, who chased after him relentlessly. Stephanie tailed behind them both, keeping them in her sight at ever turn. When they ran into the underground highway, they ran past the cars and switched between lanes to throw the other off.
“Stand down!” Authorities ordered Steph as they drove next to her with their sirens wailing. She suddenly got an idea of how to catch up to the other two.

She jumped and rolled on the windshield of the police car forcing it to completely halt. Then, she rolled off, pulled the driver out of his seat, kicked the broken windshield out of her way and drove off.

She sped past the other cars, maneuvering her way through traffic. She passed up the black figure, but he leaped and attached himself to the back of the car. She bit her lip and swerves left and right, hoping to shake him off, but he hung on tightly.

“Sam, I can’t shake this guy.”

“Right behind you.”

Unfortunately, Sam couldn’t get there quickly enough, so Steph proceeded to ram into other cars in order scrape the man off. That didn’t work either. Then, just as soon as Bucky was in her sights, he disappeared again as he leaped over sand barrel barriers to the opposite side of traffic. She drove through the barrels, and avoid gridlock set up to trap them.

Bucky continued his escape on a stolen motorcycle, but once Steph caught a clear view of him, the stranger climbed to the front of the car and used it as leverage to pounce on him once he was within reach. However, Bucky caught his attack and Stephanie watched them struggle on the speeding bike. Luckily, Bucky threw him off but he made another move to thwart them all off that caught Stephanie by surprise.

He threw a bomb on the hovering bridge which blew off the ledge and covered his trail with debris. Stephanie swerved to a stop and jumped out of the car to run after him on foot. The black figure had knocked him off of the bike and had him floored, ready to strike. Stephanie jumped head first and wrapped her arms around his waist, twisting him away before he could lay a finger on her husband.

They all stood up, and Stephanie glared angrily at the black suit as she raised her arm protectively towards Bucky.

Suddenly, War Machine flew down towards them and aimed his loaded palms at both sides, ordering sternly,

“Stand. Down. Now.”

Stephanie looked around. The reinforcements had surrounded them. Rhodey wasn’t here to help her. She knew when she was cornered, so she put her shield back on her back and raised her hands in the air.

“Congratulations, Cap. You’re a criminal.” Rhodey said, as if she should feel guilty about protecting her love.

The police approached them, yelling orders not to move or they will shoot. As they cuffed her hands behind her back, she looked at the black figure, hoping to see who he really was. The man calmly removed his helmet. Both she and Rhodey looked at him in astonishment. It was the Prince of Wakanda, Prince T’Challa.

“Your Highness.” Rhodey addressed him respectfully.

Both T’Challa and Stephanie looked at Bucky as he was handcuffed and forced on his belly. Then they locked eyes with each other, knowing that their fight for Bucky’s life was not over.
Stephanie was separated from the rest until the final armored car ride back to the Task Force base in Berlin. She took that time to calm down and remind herself that the CIA would keep Bucky alive for as long as they needed, so she still had time to prove his innocence and have him released back to her. They were still legally married after all, so she had her rights and he had his.

When the guards uncuffed her and shoved her into the armored van, she noticed that Bucky wasn’t in the car with the others. Since he was officially a suspect, they must have been transporting him separately. She frowned; she needed to see his face to see how he was taking this. The guards put her next to Prince T’Challa and kept Sam in the backseat. It was a long and tense car ride.

“So you like cats?” Sam broke the silence.

“Sam.” Stephanie softly stopped him. They were already in trouble with the CIA, they couldn’t risk upsetting the Prince of Wakanda as well, considering she had already been in poor favor with the King before his death.

“What?” Sam continued, “Dude shows up dressed as a cat, you don’t want to know more?”

The Prince didn’t respond. He seemed preoccupied with other matters.

“Your suit,” Stephanie asked calmly, “It’s vibranium?”

Prince T’Challa finally acknowledged them, “The Black Panther has been the protector of Wakanda for generations. A mantle, passed from warrior to warrior...And now because your husband murdered my father...I also wear the mantle of King.”

He looked at Stephanie directly, “So I ask you...as both warrior and King...do you think love will keep him safe from me?”

She looked away. His threats didn’t shake her. He was going to see the truth before he got the chance to kill him.

Once they arrived at the Task Force headquarters, Stephanie walked out of the van to see a horrifying sight that made her want to scream. Bucky was wasn’t just brought in in handcuffs, he was caged and restrained like an animal. His prison was a portable cell block, and he was strapped to a steel chair by metal bars covering his shoulders and tying his wrists to the armrests. What broke her was his defeated gaze. He resigned himself to this treatment, as if he had forgotten how it felt to be treated like a human being.

Stephanie channeled her sorrow into a tranquil rage as she confronted the man in charge, “What’s gonna happen to him?”

“Same thing that ought to happen to you,” The short smug man answered, “Psychological evaluation and extradition.”

“This is Everett Ross, Deputy Task Force Commander.” Sharon introduced him as she stood next to him. Her frown told them that she didn’t like this any better than they did.

“What about a lawyer?” Stephanie asked.

“Lawyer. That’s funny.” The man shrugged off the idea, and Stephanie knew that this wasn’t going to go well for any of them. He turned to Sharon and his guards and told them, “See their weapons...
are placed in lock up. We’ll write you a receipt.”

Sam watched the guards take away his wings, “I better not look out the window and see anybody flying around in that.”

As they followed Commander Ross and Agent 13, Stephanie took one last look at Bucky before they took his cell away. With her desperate eyes meeting his, she promised that she was going to get him out of this.

As they walked through the halls, Ross addressed Prince, or, King T’Challa personally, “You’ll be provided with an office instead of a cell, and do me a favor, stay in it.”

“I don’t intend on going anywhere.” T’Challa spoke to Ross like an old acquaintance. So Ross was already in T’Challa’s corner, which made things even worse.

Natasha joined them on their walk, “For the record, this is what making things worse looks like.”

Stephanie didn’t have time to argue with her right now so she just made her point short, “He’s alive.”

When they arrived in the conference area for holding, Tony was already trying to reason with the other Ross on the phone, assuring him that their little scene in Romania would be taken care of and that there would be consequences.

“Try not to break anything while we fix this.” Natasha told them before leaving them to Tony’s scolding.

“Consequences?” Stephanie asked.

“Secretary Ross wants you both prosecuted. Had to give him something.” Tony explained.

Stephanie relaxed slightly, “I’m not getting that shield back, am I?”

“Technically, it’s the government’s property.” Natasha clarified as she walked off with Tony, “Wings, too.”

“That’s cold.” Sam shook his head, remembering how she helped him retrieve those in the first place.

“Warmer than jail!” Tony got the last word before they were left on their own.

Luckily, Stephanie and Sam weren’t imprisoned themselves. They were free to roam around while everyone was concerned with prepping Bucky for his psych eval. Stephanie remained with security as she watched his cell taken to an isolated chamber and plugged into the power supply to brighten the lights in his box. Her muscles quivered as she focused on him. What was he thinking about? What could she do for him? How were they going to get out of this?

“Hey, you wanna see something cool?” Tony interrupted her solitude as he entered the clear conference room. He held up a small rectangular box, “I pulled something from Dad’s archives. Felt timely.”

Stephanie took a seat at the table. Tony looked at her to get a sense of just how tense she was, and softly opened the box and pushed it towards her.

“FDR signed the Lend-Lease bill with these in 1941.” Tony explained as he showed off the pens inside, “Provided support to the Allies when they needed it most.”
Stephanie was amused that he was trying to cheer her up with something vintage and historical, but it made her feel more like a museum piece.

“Some would say it brought our country closer to war.” She smiled sarcastically.

Tony bit his lip, “See? If not for these, you wouldn’t be here.”

Stephanie knew he didn’t mean it like that, but it cut her the wrong way. He’s right. She wouldn’t be here. Bucky wouldn’t be here. They wouldn’t have needed to go out and fight. They would have stayed home, lived their life. Maybe try again to start a family. If she couldn’t do it herself, there were plenty of children in orphanages who needed a home. There was other ways to make the world a better place than fighting its wars.

“I’m trying to...what do you call it? That’s an...olive branch.” Tony sat across from her, and fumbled with his hands like he was nervous she would go off, “Is that what you call it?”

Stephanie smiled. She wasn’t mad at him directly, but it did make her think that she didn’t want Tony to get stuck in this life either. She didn’t want him to go through this with the woman he loved.

“Is Pepper here?” Stephanie asked, since last time she checked, she and Tony were working on a reconciliation, “I didn’t see her.”

“We’re kinda...well not kinda...” Tony stammered.

“Pregnant?” Stephanie suggested hopefully.

“No, definitely not.” Tony shook his head, “We’re taking another break. It’s nobody’s fault.”

Stephanie’s heart sank and she blushed in embarrassment, “I’m so sorry, Tony. I really thought you two would-”

“A few years ago, I almost lost her, so I trashed all my suits.” Tony explained, “Then we had to mop up Hydra, and then Ultron, which I already told you is when she...so we tried to talk it out, you know, as good couples do, but...then, I never stopped, because the truth is, I don’t wanna stop...”

Stephanie nodded with him sympathetically. She really wanted the best for him, despite all this.

“I don’t want to lose her, but...” Tony looked at her, “I don’t want to lose you...this...what we have with the Avengers...either, so I thought the Accords could split the difference.”

Stephanie looked down, and she felt her core sink to the bottom. She could finally hear it clearly for the first time. When Pepper first left and he asked her to stay...it was because he felt something for her, too. And as long as Stephanie was still there...he was always going to feel that conflict. Well, that wasn’t any fault of hers, but still, it made her tense up even more.

“You know, Dad was a pain in the ass, but he and Mom always made it work.” Tony stood up and walked towards the glass.

“I’m glad Howard got married.” Stephanie said genuinely, “I only knew him when he was young and single.”

“Oh really?” Now Tony was being sarcastic, “You two knew each other? He never mentioned that! Maybe only a thousand times!”

“I don’t mean to make things difficult...” Stephanie said apologetically.
“God, she hated you…” Tony rubbed his mouth as he let out a chuckle, “Especially when Dad would…”

That caught Stephanie’s attention back immediately, “What?”

“Nah,” Tony waved his hand, “You don’t want to hear about it.”

“Please, go on.” Stephanie said insistently.

Tony let out a quick sigh and paced back and forth, “Dad tried to put up one of your framed posters in his study. You know, one of those war bond ads with the bombshell hair and the jacket? Mom tried to tell him to take it down, but he refused. He said it was one of the last things he had of you.”

Stephanie’s head was reeling, and her eyes shook.

“You wanna know what she did? She yanked it off the wall and she smashed the frame across his desk. Totally shattered it. Now...My dad yelled at me plenty of times. That I was used to, but I had never seen him raise his voice at my mother like that...until then.”

Stephanie felt the lump that kept her from speaking.

“Now I know you’re a very polite person,” Tony lost control of his tongue, “But if she were here, she’d punch you in your perfect tits.”

Stephanie covered her mouth as she fought back the tears. Howard...he had always been a flirt, but she had never considered that he actually loved her. But then, why else would he go through such an effort to find her and preserve her memory, if not for love? So what was Tony doing this for?

“I’m sorry.” Tony stopped himself, “That’s too far. I...I don’t want to see you gone. I...We need you, Cap. So far, nothing’s happened that can’t be undone if you sign. We can make the last 24 hours legit. The man you love gets transferred into an American psych-center instead of a Wakandan prison.”

Stephanie breathed a shaky sigh and took one of the pens in her hand. Feelings aside, if signing could get Bucky the help he needs, then it was worth considering. The problem was that Tony didn’t have the authority to make the calls he was promising her. That was up to Secretary and Commander Ross, and neither of them looked willing to aide her.

Stephanie stood up and twirled the pen between her fingers, “I’m not saying it’s impossible, but there would have to be safeguards.”

“Sure.” Tony sounded agreeable, “Once we put out the PR fire, those documents can be amended. I’d file a motion to have you and Wanda reinstated.”

“Wanda? What about Wanda?” Stephanie was lost once again. Always two steps forward and one step back with Tony.

“She’s fine. She’s confined to the compound, currently. Vision’s keeping her company.”

Confined? Like a prisoner? Stephanie turned away and headed for the exit, “Oh God, Tony… Everytime I think you see things the right way-”

“It’s 100 acres with a lap pool.” Tony defended himself, speaking over her with a loud voice. As if a fancy prison was less of a prison, “It’s got a screening room. There’s worse ways to protect people.”
“Protection?” Stephanie approached him again, scolding him, “Is that how you see this? This is protection? It’s internment, Tony!”

“She’s not a US citizen, and they don’t grant visas to weapons of mass destruction.” Tony argued.

Stephanie was fuming. Wanda was not a weapon, just like Bucky was not a weapon, and Stephanie was not a weapon or a golden idol to be admired by Tony or his father.

“She’s a kid!” Stephanie screamed.

“GIVE ME A BREAK!” Tony screeched, “I’m doing what needs to be done to stave off something worse.”

“You keep telling yourself that.” Stephanie’s eyes streamed down tears as she threw the pen at his head and stormed off, “Hate to break the set.”
Stephanie was running towards the restrooms to cry in private when she bumped into Sam on his way to security. He didn’t need to ask to know what was wrong.

“Aw, Steph…come here.” He said gently as he pulled her into a hug. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and clutched them tightly and buried her face in the nape of his neck to muffle her heavy sobbing. Sam was one of the few friends she had left, so she held him as if someone was trying to steal him away.

She didn’t want to show it to the rest of her team, but she was truly afraid. She had just buried Peggy, and if she didn’t do something, she might have to bury Bucky, too. Or at least watch him waste away behind bars, along with Wanda. And Tony wouldn’t be able to help her. She didn’t even know if he would want to. So as her world dissolved under her feet, she clung to Sam to keep herself grounded.

Sam patted her back and rubbed her head until she cried it all out, shushing her and telling her it was going to be okay.

“C’mon,” He kept his arm on her back as he led her back to security, “You can do this. We just gotta get through this.”

Stephanie leaned on the edge of the conference table facing the security feed of the psychiatric doctor arriving to evaluate Bucky. Unfortunately, since she was technically in custody, she had to remain in the glass cell and couldn’t hear the audio, so she just had to read Bucky’s faces. He wasn’t afraid or angry, he just looked…tired.

Agent 13 entered the conference cell and handed a slip of paper to Sam, “The receipt for your gear.”

Sam looked it over and groaned, “Bird costume? C’mon.”

“I didn’t write it.” She shrugged and looked at Stephanie. She may have had her back turned to her, but she could see her red eyes and shining cheeks in the reflection. Sharon looked around briefly before pressing the button that removed the restrictions on the monitor in front of Stephanie.

“I’m not here to judge you. I’m just here to ask you a few questions.” The doctor’s voice said loud and clearly.

When Stephanie noticed she had both video and audio of Bucky, she looked at Sharon briefly in gratitude.

“How do you know where you are, James?” The doctor asked, but ‘James’ was silent, so he told him, “I can’t help you if you don’t talk to me, James.”

“…My name is Bucky.” He said with scratchy voice.

Stephanie covered her mouth as the tears started all over again for her. He remembered his name! Not the legal name he could have memorized from government documents, but the name she called him. So now she knew that he was himself again.
She wiped her cheeks and looked at the photographic “evidence” that pinned him as the bomber, now even more confident in his innocence. She asked Sam and Sharon,

“Why would the Task Force release this photo to begin with?”

“Get the word out? Involve as many eyes as we can?” Sharon answered simply.

“Right.” Stephanie nodded, “It’s a good way to get a guy out of hiding. Set off a bomb, get your picture taken. Get seven billion people looking for the Winter Soldier.”

“You’re saying someone framed him to find him.” Sharon caught her idea.

“Steph, we looked for the guy for two years and found nothing.” Sam reminded her.

“We didn’t bomb the UN. That turns a lot of heads.” Steph continued.

“Yeah, but that doesn’t guarantee that whoever framed him would get him. It guarantees that we would.” Sharon said, but as the words left her mouth, they all realized it.

Whoever wanted to catch Bucky must be working within the UN somehow. They all turned to the monitor to look at the doctor, who had been granted the special privilege of being alone with Bucky, save for the security cameras…

...And that’s when power went out. All the screens went black and the lights dimmed down, except for the flashing red emergency lights. Stephanie’s body stiffened in preparation for a fight. She looked at Sharon, who knew this building better than her.

“Sub-level five, East Wing.” She told her.

Stephanie ran down the stairs at superhuman speed, with Sam trailing behind her, but by the time they reached the correct level, the floor was already littered with guards. She checked one’s pulse to see if they were dead or just unconscious, but she was interrupted by the pathetic sound of the doctor playing gazelle and softly calling for help.

She marched over to the doctor and ordered sternly, “Get up.”

She harshly grabbed him by his jacket and held him against the wall, “Who are you? What do you want?”

The doctor calmly answered, “To see an empire fall.”

From behind her, she heard the sound of a metal arm attacking Sam. She turned around and saw Bucky fling Sam against the frame of his shattered cell. Then, he came charging towards her. She barely ducked him time to avoid his left hook. She shot back up and punched him in the face with the intention to knock him out, but he took the brunt of it and remained sturdy. He kicked her in the gut, which knocked her down and sent her sliding into the other room. She quickly got back up again and defended herself from his quick kicks and punches. The Winter Soldier was awake, and Bucky was once again trapped inside.

His kick caught her against the elevator door, and she dodged his punch in time, but it left a heavy indentation in the metal doors. She caught the next punch, but as she squeezed the metal fist in her hands, it whirred as it powered up to use more force. Eventually, it overpowered her and punched her through the metal doors, tearing them off and sending her falling down the elevator shaft and hitting the concrete floor. Now that she was out of the way, the Winter Soldier carried on with his mission, whatever it was.
She felt the pain of the impact immediately, and whimpered as she tried to stand again. Everyone was in danger. She couldn’t just stay down here. She struggled back on her feet and ditched her jacket and jumped to get a hold of the elevator cables. They reminded her of the rope at the Wall Climb from basic training. The one she struggled with the most before the serum. She squeezed them tightly and hoisted herself in the air, climbing inch by inch until she could swing through an open door and reach solid ground.

With the elevator busted, she had to run up the stairs to the rooftop level, where she knew the helicopters would be. She burst through the door right as the helicopter was about to take flight. No, she couldn’t let him get away. Not this time. She sprinted up the stairs and leaped in the air, grabbing the landing skids in time. She tried to force her weight down to keep her feet on the ground, but her boots skidded against the helipad, pulling her closer to the edge. She threw her hand out to reach for something, anything. She grabbed the metal bar on the edge of the helipad just in time and held on as tightly as she could. She clenched her teeth as the forces strained her arms, but she didn’t let go.

Suddenly, the helicopter made a sudden turn towards her, and she dashed out of its path before it crashed into the landing site, the rotors spinning into the concrete. She ducked until it came to a stop, and she looked up to see the cockpit windshield only a few inches from her face.

The Winter Soldier’s metal fist burst through the glass and grabbed her neck. His fiery eyes stared at her intensely as he squeezed harder. She pushed against the glass to try and free herself, but that set the rest of the aircraft off balance and teetering over the edge. She tried to grab his arm and pull his fingers off of her, but the helicopter took a dive into the river below, and it wasn’t until he was submerged underwater that he let her go.

Stephanie swam after the helicopter and yanked Bucky’s seatbelt off of him. She wrapped her arm around his torso and brought his unconscious body back up to the surface. Their reunion was just getting more and more complicated, but at least now she had returned the favor of when he pulled her out of the river.
Stephanie carried Bucky to a nearby abandoned auto repair garage, waiting for him to regain consciousness. Sam regrouped with her and sadly told her that the doctor had escaped. Since Bucky was the last one who had spoken with him, he would have a lot more explaining to do when he woke up. As much as it hurt her to do so, they had to keep his metal arm restrained in a vice grip in case it wasn’t Bucky who opened his eyes.

Stephanie circled around their hideout and watched for police. She saw the helicopters surrounding the Task Force headquarters. She bit her lip and wondered how many allies she still had who could help her out.

“Hey Cap!” Sam alerted Stephanie as soon as Bucky started moving around.

She ran over but stopped at a safe distance. Bucky moaned and wearily shifted around and clutched the vice for support. His gravely voice let out a quiet name.

“Steph…”

Her heart raced with anticipation, but she still needed something to reassure her that if she got close, he wouldn’t strangle her again.

“Which Bucky am I talking to?” She asked in her stern voice.

“Your…mom’s name is Sarah…” He smiled as his mind clung to the memory desperately, “She…gave me her ring to propose to you…and because I was stupid I didn’t do it until after her fu-”

He was cut off when Stephanie roughly smushed her lips against his. She’d waited two years to do that. She grabbed his stubbled face and kissed him over and over with tears in her eyes. His mouth was cold and still tasted of salt water, but she couldn’t get enough of it. Bucky was taken aback at first, but gently put his free hand on her back.

“Woah! Whoa!” Sam exclaimed, “Just like that? We’re supposed to be cool?”

Stephanie pulled her lips away to look at Sam, but kept her hands on Bucky’s shoulders, “You can’t read that in a museum.”

“What did I do?” Bucky groaned.

Stephanie bit her lips and shrugged sadly, “Enough.”

“Oh God…” He sighed and dipped his head defeatedly, “I knew this would happen.”

She lifted his head and listened to him sympathetically.

“Everything Hydra put inside me is still there. All he had to do is say the goddamn words.” He continued.

“Who was he?” Steph asked quietly.

“I don’t know.” He groaned.

Steph really wanted to just take him away from all this right now, but they still had a job to do. As
nice as this felt, she had to get back to business.

“People are dead. The bombing, the setup, the doctor did all of that just to get 10 minutes with you.” Stephanie calmly explained the direness of their situation, “I need you to do better than ‘I don’t know.’”

She gave him a moment to focus, and she could see the gears turning as he stared at the ceiling.

“He wanted to know about Siberia...where I was kept. He wanted to know exactly where.” He explained.

Stephanie was confused. If Bucky was here now, why would he be concerned about where he used to be?

“Why would he need to know that?” She asked.

He looked at her and said, “Because I’m not the only Winter Soldier.”

Stephanie’s whole body tensed up as he explained that over twenty years ago, he was assigned to steal S.H.I.E.L.D’s own brand of super soldier serum. The serum was used on five members of Hydra to make a whole litter of Winter Soldiers.

“Who were they?” She asked.

“Their most elite death squad. More kills than anyone in Hydra history.” Bucky said, “And that was before the serum.”

“They all turn out like you?” Sam asked.

“Worse.” Bucky responded.

Stephanie turned to stone. She could barely handle one Winter Soldier on her own. Now she would have to deal with five of them. Luckily, she didn’t have to be alone, now that she had Bucky and Sam with her.

“The doctor, could he control them?” Stephanie asked.

“Enough.” Bucky rasped.

“He said he wanted to see an empire fall.” Stephanie told them to see if they could make out what he meant.

“With these guys, he could do it. They speak 30 languages, can hide in plain sight, infiltrate, assassinate, destabilize.” Bucky explained matter-of-factly, “They could take a whole country down in one night, and you’d never see them coming.”

Stephanie stood up to deliberate with Sam.

“This would’ve been a lot easier a week ago.” Sam whispered, knowing their options were extremely limited now. They didn’t even have their gear.

“If we call Tony…” Steph didn’t have a lot of faith in that decision, but she still put it out there.

“Nah, he won’t believe us.” Sam shot it down.
“Even if he did—” Stephanie continued.

“Who knows if the Accords would let him help.” Sam said.

Stephanie sighed. With the Accords signed, that meant that Tony, Nat, and all their crew were officially out of this fight.

“We’re on our own.” Stephanie said.

“Maybe not.” Sam shrugged, “I know a guy.”

This friend of Sam’s lived all the way in California, so Stephanie would have to make some calls of her own. Thankfully, Clint answered her call and agreed to round up this Scott fellow and also rescue Wanda from the confines of the Avengers compound. In the meantime, she used a payphone to call in a favor from Agent 13. Sharon believed in Bucky’s innocence, especially after the fiasco with the doctor. So she gave them a rendezvous point where she could meet them.

“Not sure you understand the concept of a getaway car.” Sharon said when she saw Steph emerge from a blue Volkswagen Beetle with her boys crammed into the small seats.

“It’s low profile.” Stephanie explained.

“Good, because this kind of stuff tends to draw a crowd.” Sharon opened the backseat of her car to reveal her shield and Sam’s Falcon wings.

Stephanie gasped in surprise. She’d honestly only expected Sharon to sneak out a few guns and protective gear. She didn’t actually expect to get their full gear back.

“Thank you, Oh my God!” Stephanie was so relieved she hugged Sharon and kissed her without a thought, “I owe you again!”

“...Keeping a list.” Sharon didn’t know how else to respond. She looked at Steph’s boys in the car, one of whom was laughing and clapping in shotgun while the other was shuffling around uncomfortably in the back seat, “You know, he kinda tried to kill me.”

“Sorry, I’ll put it on the list, too.” Stephanie smiled for a short bit, but then dropped it when she remembered how much danger they were in, “They’re going to come looking for you.”

“I know.” Sharon responded. She didn’t follow in her aunt’s footsteps to play it safe, after all.

Stephanie gave her one last goodbye hug and a kiss on the forehead before she looked back at Sam and Bucky in the car, who were both smiling and nodding as they looked at her.

“Quit gawking and come get your gear.” She ordered.

Their next stop was the Leipzig-Halle airport where Clint had already brought the rest of the team. They parked in the middle tier of the shelter parking garage near his inconspicuous white van. It was a relief to get out of that cramped car and the escape the silent tension brewing Sam and Bucky.

Considering their first encounter was when Bucky destroyed Sam’s car and the second encounter was when Bucky ripped off one of his wings, it was going to take some time before they got along.

“Cap.” Clint greeted her as if nothing was wrong and shook her hand.
“You know I wouldn’t have called you if I had any other choice.” Stephanie really did feel guilty about pulling him out of retirement for this, but it was too big of an emergency.

“Hey girl, you’re doing me a favor.” Clint looked at Wanda as she got out of the front seat, “Besides, I owe a debt.”

Stephanie immediately went to hug Wanda, “Thanks for having my back.”

Wanda shrugged and looked at Clint, “It was time to get off my ass.”

“What about our other recruit?” Steph asked.

“He’s raring to go.” Clint said as he opened up the backseat of the van to let out Sam’s friend, “Had to put a little coffee in him, but he should be good.”

The man napping in the back of the van jolted awake when the door slammed open. He rubbed his eyes as he got out, “What time zone is this?”

According to Sam, the man’s name was Scott Lang, and he had a special suit that could make him shrink to the size of an ant, but keep all the strength and durability of a full-sized man. Sam didn’t give all the details on how he met the man, but he assured her that his powers were legitimate.

“Come one.” Clint shoved Scott towards Stephanie and Sam. The man was dumbfounded at who he was meeting.

“C-Captain America!” He greeted like a giddy fan and held out his hand.

“Mr. Lang.” She said politely as she shook his hand.

“It’s an honor.” He kept smiling and she could feel his hand trembling within the shake itself, “...I’m shaking your hand too long.”

“Wow, this is awesome!” Scott looked at who was behind him, which happened to be Wanda, “Captain America. I know you, too. You’re great!”

Scott looked Stephanie up and down to see if she was everything he imagined she’d be. His hands came forward as if he was about to touch her, but he smartly decided against it and just put them together in a steeple.

“Jeez...look, I wanna say, I know you know a lot of super people, so thinks for thanking of me.” He said sweetly which made Stephanie smile.

“Hey man!” He greeted Sam familiarly.

“What’s up, Tic Tac?” Sam said coolly.

“Uh, good to see you. Look, what happened last time when I-” He said nervously.

“It was a great audition, but it’ll never happen again.” Sam cut him off before he could explain. Looks like Stephanie could trust that Ant-Man here could get the drop on Falcon, which mean that he would be a good asset to the team.

“They tell you what we’re up against?” She asked Scott.

“Something about some...psycho assassins?” He said plainly.
“We’re outside the law on this one,” She warned him, “So if you come with us, you’re a wanted man.”

“Yeah, well...what else is new.” Scott accepted.

“We should get moving.” Bucky told them from the Volkswagen.

“We got a chopper lined up.” Clint said.

Suddenly, alarms went off throughout the airport, and a German voice gave a message over the PA.

“They’re evacuating the airport.” Bucky explained.

“Stark.” Sam said, knowing Tony was on their tail.

“Stark?” Scott asked.

Stephanie nodded and looked at the team around her. Hopefully they could sneak away until Tony found them, and then they could stop the doctor and these Winter Soldiers before another catastrophe struck.

“Suit up.” She commanded.
Stephanie zipped into her Captain America uniform and ripped the “A” patch off of her arm. If the Avengers were legally under the Accords, then it was best to not call herself an Avenger now. Bucky didn’t have an official uniform to change into, so Clint brought him a thick black jacket to brave the cold of the Siberia. It was a little snug, so Bucky ripped the sleeve off on the side with his metal arm to give his weapon more mobility. Everyone else changed into their official fighting gear either in the van or behind the cars.

They knew that Tony would be looking for them, so Stephanie chose to go out first, with everyone else taking cover until the coast was clear. She found the helicopter that Clint had secured and ran over to it, but she stopped when a localized EMP landed on it and fritzed the whole chopper. She looked up and saw Iron Man and War Machine flying above her head.

“Wow, it’s so weird how you run into people at the airport. Don’t you think that’s weird?” Tony bantered with his own partner. When his mask came off, He could see the big purple bruise around his eye. Bucky must have given him hell in Vienna.

“Definitely weird.” Rhodey said.

“Hear me out, Tony.” Stephanie explained, “That doctor, the psychiatrist. He’s behind all of this.”

Then, the Black Panther emerged on the scene, pouncing into position.

“Captain.” He greeted.

“Your Highness.” Stephanie nodded her head respectfully.

“Anyway,” Tony said, “Ross gave me 36 hours to bring you in. That was 24 hours ago. Can you help a brother out?”

“You’re after the wrong guy.” Stephanie insisted.

“Your judgment is askew.” Tony snapped, “Your husband killed innocent people yesterday.”

“And there are five more super soldiers just like him!” Stephanie tried to continue, “I can’t let the doctor find them first, Tony. I can’t.”

“Stephanie…” Natasha interrupted from behind her, “You know what’s about to happen. Do you really want to punch your way out of this one?”

It really did hurt to see Natasha against her on this. Natasha was the one who helped her adjust to this new crazy world. When everyone else only called her to give her a new mission, Natasha was the first one who called just to chat over some coffee. She genuinely wanted Stephanie to be happy, and now she asking her to hand that happiness over? She sadly looked away from Natasha and scowled stubbornly at Tony.

“All right, I’ve run out of patience. Underoos!” Tony called out.

Stephanie was confused until she saw white webs stick onto her shield. When she tried to throw it at the brightly colored figure jumping over her head, the shield was pulled off of her arm, and webs shot out to cuff her wrists together. All of this happened in the blink of an eye. She watched the thief land on a truck next to the helicopter, adorned in a red and blue bodysuit with white eyes outlined in metallic black. It wasn’t an Iron Man suit, but it was still clearly Tony’s design.
“Nice job, kid.” Tony said.

“Thanks!” A very juvenile voice cracked, “Well, I could have sticked the landing a little better, it’s just... new suit. It- It’s nothing, Mr. Stark. It’s perfect, thank you!”

“Yeah, we don’t really need to start a conversation.” Tony cut off the boy, who Stephanie was guessing was either a high school intern or a secret illegitimate son, neither of which she could judge as worse.

“Okay…” The boy stuttered and saluted Stephanie timidly, “Cap-Captain. Big fan. I’m Spider-Man.”

“Yeah, we’ll talk about it later, just-”

“Hey everyone.”

“Good job.” Tony finally managed to get the kid to be quiet.

Stephanie looked back at Tony in amusement, “You’ve been busy.”

“And you’ve been a complete idiot.” Tony shot back, “Dragging in Clint, ‘rescuing’ Wanda from a place she doesn’t even want to leave, a safe place. I’m trying to keep… I’m trying to keep you from tearing the Avengers apart.”

Stephanie sighed and shook her head, “You did that when you signed.”

Tony huffed. “Alright, we’re done. You’re going to turn Barnes over, and you’re gonna come with us, now, because it’s us or a squad of J-SOC with no compunction about being impolite!”

Stephanie turned her face away from him. He would have to be more specific than that. It almost sounded like he forgot that Barnes was her last name, too. He also forgot that barking orders at her was pointless once she’d made up her mind.

“We found it.” Sam reported over their comm, “Their quinjet’s in Hangar 5, north runway.”

Now that Stephanie knew where to go, she held up her bound wrists as the signal for her team to assemble. Clint’s arrow pierced straight through the fibers and freed her hands.

“All right, Lang.” Stephanie gave her new teammate the signal.

“Hey guys, somethin’— Spider-Man tried to warn Tony about the small spec crawling on the shield, but Scott returned to normal size and kicked the kid down.

“Woah, what the hell was that?” Rhodey asked.

Scott retrieved the shield and returned it to Stephanie, “I believe this is yours, Captain America.”

“Oh great…” Tony moaned as he checked his scanner, “All right, there’s two on parking deck. One of them’s Maximoff, I’m gonna grab her. Rhodey, you wanna take Cap?”

“I got two in the terminal. Wilson and Barnes.” Rhodey stated.

“Barnes is mine!” The Black Panther ran towards the terminal, head-on.

Stephanie threw her shield at Rhodey to distract him and buy her boys more time to run. Then, she
went after T’Challa to keep him from the terminal. She threw the shield to knock him down and then jumped on his back, but he flipped out of her grip and landed on his hands and feet.

“Move, Captain.” His deep voice commanded, “I won’t ask a second time.”

She held up her shield as he spun around and kicked at her. He was quick with his razor-sharp vibranium claws that dragged along the shield and made sparks. She barely evaded each jab and covered herself desperately.

“Sorry Cap, this won’t kill you, but it ain’t gonna tickle either.” Rhodey warned as he pulled out a large stun baton and swung down at her. She blocked it but kept it at her side instead of throwing it at him.

She waited for him to swoop down at her like a bird of prey, and jumped at the right moment to flip kick him down and sent him sliding against the pavement. When T’Challa took his turn to strike, she power kicked him as well.

“Hey, Cap! Head’s up!” Ant-Man ran to her side and tossed her what looked like a little toy truck as he held up a small disc of his own, “Throw it at this...Now!”

When he threw the disc, she threw the truck. When it made contact, it instantly grew to a full-sized truck that barreled directly at War Machine.

“Oh come on!” Rhodey shouted as the truck exploded upon impact and rolled over him. Black Panther ran out of the way.

“Oh man, I thought it was a water truck.” Scott said when he saw Steph glaring at him, “Uh, sorry.”

She and Scott took advantage of their time to run towards the hangar. Once it was in their sights, the rest of their team converged in a huddle.

“C’mon!” Steph ordered as they needed to make it to the jet without hurting anyone else. Bucky quickly sprinted to be right by her side.

Suddenly, a bright yellow laser beam shot down and drew a line in front of their path. They looked up and saw Vision flying above them.

“Captain Barnes.” He announced, “I know you believe what you’re doing is right, but for the collective good, you must surrender now.”

One by one, the other team lined up against hers. Black Widow, Black Panther, War Machine, Spider-Man, Vision, and the Iron Man himself. Vision was usually good at reasonable judgments, but he didn’t understand that she couldn’t give up her chance to stop the other Winter Soldiers just to satisfy the UN by letting herself get tied up in red tape. Time was of the imminence.

“What do we do, Cap?” Falcon asked on behalf of the team.

Steph looked at the challenge ahead straight-on.

“We fight.”

Without hesitation, her team marched towards Tony’s. Their slow marched turned into a charge as Falcon and Scarlet Witch took off in flight. Everyone locked eyes with chosen opponent. The Captain of course had to take on Iron Man. She saw him fly up and then swoop down in a charge. She blocked his falling punch and swung at him over and over again. She elbowed him in the face to
get him out of her way.

Once she evaded Tony, she had another little problem on her tail. The Spider-Man kid swung his way towards her, so she threw her shield which sliced through his webbing. He slid and landed on the luggage belt, but he got right back on his feet again. So maybe there was more to this kid than Tony’s tech.

“That thing does not obey the laws of physics at all.” The boy jested.

“Look, kid. There’s a lot going on here that you don’t understand.” Stephanie didn’t want to hurt him, but she knew there was a lot a teenager could take.

“Mr. Stark said you’d say that. Wow.” He flung his arm out and shot a web at her. When she blocked it, it stuck to her shield. She knew better than to let him slide it off her arm this time. However, she missed the webs that caught her legs, and she was quickly pulled towards him. As she slide, she got back on her feet, but he kicked her and sent her flying towards a truck, and knocked the shield out of her hands.

“He also said to go for your legs.”

So this kid was also stronger than he looked. Fine, now she didn’t have to go easy on him. She jumped up and ran towards her shield, but before she could grab it, the webs grabbed her hand and then her other one. She pulled on them, but they wouldn’t snap. He pulled her like a marionette, but with the right moves, she could do the same. She brought her arms together and jump spun to wind his webs around herself and pull him across the cement until he lost his grip. She grabbed her shield and when he tried to web her up again, she gripped it and harshly yanked him close enough to whack him in the face with the shield.

The kid learned his lesson to avoid close combat with her and jumped up to the loading platform.

“Stark tell you anything else?” She asked.

“That you’re wrong. You think you’re right, and that makes you dangerous.” He answered. He jumped from the platform and used it to hold his swinging attack as he flew in for a kick. She knocked him into the support beams.

“I guess he had a point.” Stephanie threw her shield at the other support beams to bring the loading platform crashing down. If Spider-Man could hold his own against her, then he should be able to catch it without too much injury. At least, that’s what Stephanie hoped. She was both impressed and relieved when he caught it and held it up over his head, even if his knees were shaking as he did so.

She nodded and encouraged him, “You got heart, kid. Where you from?”

“Queens…” He muttered as he struggled.

She tilted her head and smiled at him, “Brooklyn.”

She quickly made her escape as Spider-Man was distracted with the platform. His knees buckling told her he wasn’t going to hold it much longer. It was a shame, really. He seemed like such a good kid. It would have been nice to train him before all of this.

Stephanie and Bucky quickly met up behind one of the trucks to figure out their next maneuver.

“We gotta go. That guy’s probably in Siberia by now.” Bucky said.
“We gotta draw out the flyers.” Stephanie added, “I’ll take Vision, you get to the jet.”

“No, you get to the jet. Both of you!” Sam spoke up on the comm, “The rest of us aren’t getting out of here.”

“As much as I hate to admit it, if we’re gonna win this one,” Clint sighed, “Some of us might have to lose it.”

Stephanie dipped her head down. She never meant for it to get this bad. She didn’t want to sacrifice the rest of her team for this.

“This isn’t the real fight, Steph.” Sam reminded her.

“Alright, Sam,” Stephanie asked in a low voice, “What’s the play?”

“We need a diversion. Something big.”

“I got something kinda big.” Scott chirped in, “But I can’t hold it very long. On my signal, run like hell. And if I tear myself in half...don’t come back for me.”

“He’s gonna tear himself in half?” Bucky asked.

“You sure about this, Scott?” Steph asked.

“I do it all the time.” He said lightly but then corrected himself, “I mean once, in a lab, then I passed out.”

Bucky and Steph waited for him to say “Run” or “Now” but instead they heard a loud thumping. They came out from their hiding place to see Scott had enlarged himself to the size of a giant, like the ones from Jack and the Beanstalk. Steph was seeing crazier things every day.

“...I guess that’s the signal.” Stephanie said.

“Way to go, Tic-Tac!” Sam cheered.

Stephanie and Bucky booked it for the hangar. They didn’t know how long Scott could hold them off, but he had already exceeded her expectations. The quinjet was in their clear view, but then Vision’s yellow beams destroyed the watch tower and the debris was falling in their path. Thankfully, Scarlet Witch’s energy fields slowed down the fall to give them time to run under it. However, interference from War Machine made her power give out, and the metal and concrete came very close to crashing down on them.

Black Widow appeared from behind the quinjet and stood in their way. She looked at the couple and sighed, “You’re not gonna stop.”

Stephanie shook her head, “You know I can’t.”

She held up her stingers and aimed it in their direction, “I’m gonna regret this.”

However, instead of hitting Steph or Bucky, she hit Black Panther, who had followed behind them. The sting was enough to distract him for a few seconds.

“Go.” Natasha gave them one last chance.

Stephanie nodded at her gratefully and grabbed Bucky’s hand. They ran into the quinjet while
Natasha stunned Black Panther again every time he stood up. Once they took off, he tried to latch his claws onto the landing wheels, but they slipped off. In an instant, they were airborne, safe from his reach.

Black Panther looked at Natasha angrily.

She shrugged, “I said I’d help you find him, not catch him. There’s a difference. Besides...I’d hate to break the set.”
Stephanie took the pilot seat and set their course for Siberia. She took off her helmet and set it down by her feet. Even in the quinjet, the trip would take a few hours. Bucky chose to sit behind her instead of next to her. Her hands shook as she tried to think of something to say. While they had already spent the whole day together, they were too busy setting up the team with a plan to have any actual alone time together. Even when they camped out by their car on the road, Sam slept in between them. Now that the finally had the time to finally talk, she couldn’t think of anything.

“What’s gonna happen to your friends?” Bucky asked.

Stephanie wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt. Losing to Tony wasn’t the same as losing to the usual bad guys. He wasn’t going to hurt them, at least not intentionally. Still, it wasn’t Tony she was worried about, but Commander Ross. He wasn’t evil, but he certainly wasn’t gracious, either. She remembered what Clint told her, and how it important it was that she and Bucky get to Siberia at all costs, even if she had to leave the rest of the team behind. She just had to trust them like they trusted her.

“Whatever it is…” She sighed, “I’ll deal with it.”

Bucky was silent for a few more seconds before he shook his head and muttered, “I don’t know if I’m worth all this, Steph.”

That struck Stephanie to her very core. Everything she had done since she realized he was alive she did to get closer to finding him. Even when she thought he was dead, Bucky invaded her every thought. Every mission would have been ten times more successful if Bucky had been there. Bruce’s cooking was good, but Bucky’s was better. Whenever she saw a new movie, she pinpointed the moments that Bucky would like the most. If Bucky had been there from the beginning, she wouldn’t have filled her lonely bed with unimpressive men on those Saturdays where her sorrow tried to swallow her whole.

The fact that the man behind her didn’t realize this brought her to tears. Sure, he didn’t feel like the same man he was in Brooklyn. She didn’t feel like the same woman, either. Even if the Bucky she had with her right now was a completely different man, she wanted to know this beautiful stranger before fate separated them again.

She turned on the autopilot and unbuckled her seatbelt. She walked to Bucky’s seat and leaned down to grab his face tightly, her dripping wet eyes locking with his.

“You are worth everything to me.” She whispered and pressed her forehead against his, with her mouth open, waiting for him to take it.

He leaned his head up to take her kiss. It wasn’t the quick and hard pecks from the garage. They softly wrapped their lips around the other’s, and she lightly sucked on his top lip as his tongue reached inside for hers. His fingers gently ran up her soft cheeks and clutched her hair, which was still in a twisted ponytail. He slipped the rubber band off and felt the blond strands to the tip. She slowly pulled out of the kiss to lean her cheek closer to his arm and indulge in his touch. He placed his metal arm on her back to hold her as he nuzzled in the warmth of her neck. She took a seat in his lap and held onto his broad shoulders for support.

He wanted to lean closer but her legs were blocking his seatbelt buckle, so she moved her leg to straddle both him and the seat. When he unbuckled it however, they realized how much they had
been relying on the straps for balance. Bucky fell forward and took Stephanie down with him.

They lay with Stephanie’s back to the gridded floor of the quinjet. Bucky had fallen on top of her, but caught himself before his chest could collide with hers, so he hovered over her with his legs entangled in hers. She laughed at the position they’d fallen in, and to her delight, he smiled in a way she hadn’t seen for a long time. It made her knees tremble.

She ran her fingers through his sweaty hair and pulled his neck down to kiss him some more. Her hands traveled down the length of his back, desperately to feel him in his entirety. His bulky figure was the biggest she’d ever seen him, and it made her hungry to see what he could do with it.

Bucky locked in with her loving kisses and wrapped his arms around her back, with the metal arm reaching to the top of her neck to find her uniform’s zipper. She smiled gleefully and arched her back to help him get a better angle to pull it down. Once the back opened to just above her rear, she pulled her arms out of the sleeves. He pulled the uniform down enough to reveal her chest, still enclosed in a sports bra. Stephanie quickly pulled it off by the thick blue straps and threw it across the floor. Bucky wasted no time in groping her with both his flesh and metal hand, licking from under the curve of her breast up to her collarbone.

Stephanie sharply gasped and pressed his head tightly to her chest. She wanted to give him everything he wanted because he deserved it. Also, she deserved to take a little for herself as well. She worked on pulling her uniform off of her legs as he kissed and sucked on her soft chest. Once he had his fill of her tits, she flipped him over on his back and pulled down the zipper of his own jacket. She snuck her fingers under the bottom of his black undershirt and pulled it up, kissing up his abs and chest as she uncovered them. He helped her remove his shirt and jacket and threw them in the same pile with her own clothes.

She rested her chest on his and looked at him with a hopeful smile.

“I've wanted this for so long.” She whispered and kissed his nose.

Bucky held her chin and hungrily kissed her again, tasting everything that he could, which left her stunned.

“Yeah, me too.” He smiled again which began to bring the tears back to her eyes.

They gave themselves a few minutes to just lie there in each other’s embrace and kiss to make up for all the years they’d lost.

“God...you are so beautiful.” Stephanie lightly brushed the outline of his jaw with her fingers and her eyes shook with wetness.

“C’mon Steph...please don’t cry.” Bucky kissed her cheeks as they grew wet.

“I’m sorry,” She sniffled and tried to smile, “I seem to be doing that a lot lately.”

Bucky sighed and sat up, unbuckling the belt of his pants.

“Aww…” She giggled, “Are you going to cheer me up?”

“I’m gonna cheer us both up.” He cocked his head and slipped both his pants and his briefs down to his knees. His dick was starting to harden, but wasn’t completely up yet.

Stephanie smiled to herself. She hadn’t realized just how much she missed that part of him until it was right in front of her. She grabbed his thighs and kissed up to the tip of his cock. She looked up at him with doe eyes before taking the shaft in her hand and gently sucking the head. Bucky’s breath
shuttered. He bit his lip and fingered through her hair. She engulfed more of him and slowly slipped her lips against the skin.

“Stephanie…” He breathed. She missed everything, the way he said her name, the taste of his sweaty skin, the feeling of the tip of his cock brushing against the roof of her mouth, and the way his body shook when she swirled her tongue around his girth. She moaned as she vigorously sucked him.

He pulled his full erection out of her mouth and softly pushed her back to the floor. They connected again in a long kiss while he rubbed his metal fingers over her boyshort panties. They were already wet, but feeling the indented metal made chills run down her legs. He pulled her underwear down and pushed his thumb inside, coating it in her essence. Her strained whimper told him she was ready for him. She’d been ready for a long time.

“Yes...yes…” She muttered under her breath as she watched him mount her and put his dick into place. She wrapped her legs around his hips in anticipation. When he pushed himself inside of her, he gasped and buried his face in her neck. The inviting warmth overwhelmed him, and now he was the one on the verge of crying.

“It’s okay…” Stephanie cooed as she embraced him in her arms. She cradled his head in her hand and kissed him near his ear. Bucky pressed against the floor as he rolled his hips in steady thrusts. Stephanie squeezed him harder with her legs as he filled her just right. Her usually tense muscles relaxed and her hands fell against the floor. He went a little faster when he grew hungrier for the comfort she gave him. He held her arms down and threw his head back, groaning loudly as the sweet rush of pleasure went through him. He swirled his hips around which moved Stephanie in a delicious way. Her moans actually grew quieter as his intensity shook her. She indulged in feeling everything from him.

He surprised her when he became more aggressive and rolled her over on her knees and elbows. She arched her back and rolled her hips up to him and he pulled her closer and slipped himself back inside to go back to his rhythm. He ran his hand up her leg and ended at her breasts, playing with them and squeezing them tightly as he continued to fuck her desperately like a starved animal. Stephanie whimpered and moaned as she felt her climax approaching. She loved feeling him thrust harder and hold her tighter. She didn’t even know how much he’d been craving her sex since they parted.

She felt his hot and quickening breath against her shoulder. His head lay along the back of her neck, groaning and cursing in her ear. When he reached around and pressed against her crotch while hitting her good places from behind, she trembled. The orgasmic wave of throbs emitted from her and she let out a strained and high-pitched groan.

She slinked forward like a stretching feline, and Bucky gripped her hips tightly as he slowed his pace to let his climax linger. He lay flat on top of her back, pushing his hips against her a few more times as his sweet release poured inside of her.

When she sat up again, she held Bucky’s flesh hand and rubbed her thumb against his knuckles. He rolled face up, but was too winded to even get on his knees. She was going to tell him that she really needed that, but the way he exhaled in satisfaction told her that it went without saying. So, she just brushed her hair out of his face and kissed him on the forehead.
Stephanie got dressed before she landed the ship just outside the Soviet bunker. She showed Bucky where Natasha kept her assault rifles as she put her hair back into its usual twisted ponytail.

“You remember that time we had to ride back from Rockaway Beach in the back of that freezer truck?” Stephanie smiled fondly at him as she zipped up his jacket.

“Was that the time you used our train money to buy hot dogs?” Bucky smiled back.

“You blew three bucks trying to win me that stuffed bear.” Stephanie put her shield on her back.

“What did you name that thing again?” He asked.

She grinned and kissed his nose, “Bucky Bear.”

“What happened to that thing?”

“Um...I think some billionaire bought it at an auction for like a million dollars.” Stephanie shrugged as she opened the hatch, exposing them to the ice and snow, “A lot of our old stuff is in museums and private collections.”

“Well they are antiques, I guess.” Bucky handed her her helmet.

“So are we, hun.” She rubbed and patted his back.

As they looked out in the blistering storm, they remembered the mission at hand. Find the doctor, who they now identified as Helmut Zemo and stop the other Winter Soldiers from wreaking havoc. The slowly approached the bunker, and found the doors already pryed open.

“He can’t have been here more than a few hours.” Stephanie noted.

“Long enough to wake them up.” Bucky added.

Bucky lead her to the elevator and pressed the button for the bottom floor, several yards below the surface. They faced each other as the elevator slowly moved and the gears hummed. Stephanie wasn’t positive they would make it out of this alive, but with Bucky by her side, she was ready to take on the world. Bucky watched her face tense up and pulled her in for one more kiss for good luck.

When the elevator doors opened, Stephanie lifted the gate and Bucky stepped ahead first, armed and ready to fire at anything that approached them. Stephanie followed behind him, with her shield up in case they came under fire. They slowly skulked down the hallway, but they heard nothing until they went up the stairs. A loud thud alerted them and they flipped back towards the elevator and crouched. Now Stephanie was in front, shielding the both of them while Bucky stood above her, aiming his rifle.

“You ready?” Steph whispered as the doors slowly creaked as if something or someone was trying to force them open.

“Yeah.” Bucky whispered back, holding his position.

When the figure finally made its way through, she recognized the glowing white eyes and the circular light on his chest. She knew it was Tony, but she continued to hold her ground with the
shield in front of her. The helmet came down and folded back into his suit. Stephanie slowly crept towards him.

“Hello Stephanie. You seem a little defensive.” Tony said.

“It’s been a long day.” Stephanie replied.

“Well, might I say you look positively glowing this evening.” Tony said before he saw Bucky hovering behind her, “At ease, Soldier. I’m not currently after you.”

“Then why are you here?” Stephanie spat out.

Tony cocked his head, “Could be your story’s not so crazy. Maybe. Ross has no idea I’m here. I’d like to keep it that way. Otherwise, I gotta arrest myself.”

Stephanie jested, “Well that sounds like a lot of paperwork.”

He scoffed, and as he stood there, she read that he really wasn’t a threat right now, so she dropped her arms to her side.

“It’s good to see you, Tony.” Stephanie greeted.

“You too, Cap.” Tony eyed Bucky who was still in position, “Hey, Manchurian Candidate? You’re killing me. There’s a truce here. You can drop-”

Bucky didn’t listen to Tony, but he followed Stephanie’s gesture to lower his gun down. After all, she was the one calling the shots.

She didn’t fill Tony in on the whole story, but he got the idea that there were hostiles they needed to watch out for. He joined them in search and scanned for any hints of movement.

“I got heat signatures.” Tony said.

“How many?”

“Oh, one.” Tony answered, which surprised her. She expected at least five. They stepped into an open laboratory, lined with cryotanks. As the got closer, the lights turned on and the tanks were revealed to have several motionless bodies within them.

“If it’s any comfort,” Zemo’s voice echoed over the PA system, “they died in their sleep.”

Bucky walked in front of Josef’s tank, as he had been the leader of this death squad. The man’s body sunk into his chair, eyes closed, with a bullet hole in the middle of his forehead.

“Did you really think I wanted more of you?”

Bucky growled under his breath, “What the hell?”

If he didn’t want to use the other Winter Soldiers, then what was the point of coming all this way?

“I’m grateful to them, though. They brought you here.”

Zemo switched on the light in his guarded room, and by instinct Steph threw her shield, but it bounced off the glass without a scratch.

“Please, Captain.” Zemo snided, “The Soviets built this chamber to withstand the launch blast of
UR-100 rockets.”

“T’im betting I could beat that!” Tony interjected.

“Oh, I’m sure you could, Mr. Stark, given time.” Zemo said calmly, “But then you’d never know why you came.”

“You killed innocent people in Vienna just to bring us here?” Stephanie asked incredulously as she approached the chamber’s window. The man inside it was young, with the confidence and poise of royalty, but in the simple attire of a common man.

“I’ve thought about nothing else for over a year.” Zemo looked directly at Stephanie, “I studied you. I followed you, but now that you’re standing here, I just realized...there’s a bit of green in the blue of your eyes,” He chuckled, “How nice to find a flaw.”

Hearing his voice and remembering what happened the year before, Stephanie concluded, “You’re Sokovian. Is that what this is about?”

He shook his head, “Sokovia was a failed state long before you blew it to hell. No, I’m here because I made a promise.”

Stephanie knew that tone, and she nodded, “You lost someone.”

“...I lost everyone.” He whispered, “And so will you.”

He pressed a button on his keyboard and the computer screen outside of the chamber began to play a tape. She kept an eye on Zemo as she walked over to the video.

“An empire toppled by its enemies can rise again. But one which crumbles from within?” Zemo caught her attention, “That’s dead. Forever.”

Bucky and Tony slowly walked to the screen as well, still eyeing Zemo until Tony glanced at the screen, and then did a double take.

“I know that road…” Tony said with a shaky voice and then yelled out, “What is this?!?”

The date on the footage marked December 16, 1991. Stephanie shivered and swallowed hard. She and Tony both recognized that date. It was the day Howard Stark and his wife were murdered. The tape showed their car crash into the side of the road, and the engine caught fire. A motorcycle pulled up next to the car and the rider jumped off and opened their trunk. Stephanie already heard from Zola that Hydra took credit for the car accident, but she had hoped he had been lying to discourage her. Now she knew he had been telling the truth.

She also learned that Howard didn’t die upon impact. She watched him, an old and white-haired man, crawl out of the driver’s seat and plead with the rider to help his wife. He begged on his knees, but the rider grabbed him up by the hair.

Howard looked at the man’s face and in an instant he remembered, “...Sergeant Barnes.”

Stephanie covered her mouth and held back a scream. Tony’s breathing grew labored and he looked at Bucky, who lowered his head in shame.

And then another voice, Maria’s voice, weakly called out from the car, “Howard…”

So Maria didn’t die because of the crash, either.
Then, the Winter Soldier’s metal arm became visible on screen as it punched Howard in the face twice, caving in the bone of his skull. Maria cried out his name. The soldier dragged Howard’s lifeless body back into the car, placing his head against the steering wheel. Then he walked over to Maria’s side of the car and put his one flesh arm inside. They didn’t watch her die on screen, but they already knew what was happening. Finally, the tape ended once the Winter Soldier walked over to the security camera and shot out the lens.

Stephanie looked at Tony, tears falling down her face and silently heaving. When Tony jerked in Bucky’s direction, she grabbed him and held him back.

“No, Tony…” she pleaded.

Tony looked at her arms on his suit, offended that she would dare to touch him. He steadied his breath and asked her one question.

“Did you know?”

Stephanie couldn’t possibly answer that the way he wanted. Her heart sank as she realized she had truly let him down.

“I didn’t know it was him.” She said honestly.

“Don’t bullshit me, Stephanie. Did you know?”

Her lip trembled, but she took a deep breath and told him flatly, “Yes.”

Tony pulled away from her, nodding like he finally realized something. Then, in a split second, he slapped Stephanie across the face with his armored gauntlet. She yelped as she flew back and skidded across the floor. Bucky immediately retaliated and took a shot at Tony, but Tony knocked the rifle out of his grip. Both of their metal arms held against each other in a brief standstill, but Tony grabbed Bucky’s throat and flew forward, choking him in the air before sliding him against the concrete. He stepped on his metal arm and powered up his blaster with the dreaded whir that haunted Steph.

Stephanie threw her shield in time to knock Tony’s aim off. She caught it and rammed into Tony head on. Tony charged at her right back, and even with the shield protecting her, the force pushed her to the ground. Before she could get up, Tony launched restrictive cuffs around her ankles. He took off and pinned Bucky to the wall, but before he could deliver another blow, Bucky grabbed his powered gauntlet and crushed the blaster with his own metal hand.

Tony then tried to launch a tank missile to Bucky’s face directly, but Bucky redirected his arm and sent the missile towards the cryotanks. With Tony now clearly trying to kill Bucky, Stephanie knocked the cuffs off her legs with her shield and ran to find them hovering too high for her to reach them by hand. The supports of the launching pad, however, was falling in their direction, so she rolled out of the way as Tony was forced to drop Bucky back on the ground. Tony’s suit was temporarily pinned by the metal supports.

“Get out of here!” Stephanie screamed to Bucky, full of fear for his life. Bucky took off running but Tony quickly went back into the air, and fired as he tried to escape. He barely missed, but now Stephanie had time to get in his way. As Bucky opened the hatch at the top of the bunker, Stephanie futilely pleaded with Tony.

“It wasn’t him, Tony! Hydra had control of his mind!” She yelled. Howard was Bucky’s friend, too. They chose Bucky to kill him because they loved to play their cruel games.
“Move.” Tony ordered as he flew over her head.

“It wasn’t him!” She screamed and caught his boot in mid-flight, knocking the jets out with her shield.

Tony didn’t want to hear anymore from her. He fired his red beams to cut the concrete above her and send it crashing down on top of her. He continued chasing after Bucky on one jetted boot, while his target hopped from platform to platform to reach the top. When he knocked him down and cornered him, Stephanie flipped in front of him to block his fire which ricocheted back to him and threw him down to a lower platform.

“He’s not gonna stop.” Stephanie warned Bucky as she pulled him up to his feet. She gave him one quick kiss and pushed him towards the ladder, “Go.”

She watched Tony fly back up towards them, and latched her shield on her back while pulling a tool off her belt. As he flew past her, she shot out a wire like a lasso and wrapped it around Tony’s neck, dragging him down with her as she jumped towards the ground. However, they each hit different platforms on the way down, and were now on opposite sides of the bunker. She threw her shield as she watched him try to launch another missile, but he knocked it away from himself and back down to the ground floor. His targeting systems were shot, but his missiles hit the hinge of the latch, which sealed them in before Bucky could escape.

As Tony approached him once more, Bucky grabbed a steel pipe and swatted Tony away, but soon Tony had him in his grip.

“Do you even remember them?” His whisper quivered.

“I remember all of them.” Bucky said.

As Tony’s remaining boot jet began to fail, they lowered far enough for Stephanie to launch herself at them, knocking Tony off of Bucky but sending them tumbling back to the concrete floor.

Stephanie struggled for breath as she stood up and faced Tony directly, her tear streaks collecting grease and soot on her face, “This isn’t going to change what happened.”

“I don’t care.” Tony said, “He killed my mom.”

Tony leaped at her with heavy fists. She blocked what she could and threw when he was open. She grabbed Tony in a headlock, but he used his blaster to force her backwards and spinning to the ground. He pinned her, but she dodged his concrete-breaking punches.

Suddenly, Bucky jumped in with the shield and knocked Tony off of her. Now with the two of them against him, they took turns distracting him with the shield and punching him when his face was turned. The focused less on protecting themselves and more on protecting each other.

One blast from Tony’s gauntlet was all it took to send Stephanie into the wall. Now Bucky was angry. He punched at his helmet and he grabbed his arm as it fired lethal beams from the ground to the ceiling. Then, one square punch to the chest put Tony against the wall. Bucky forced his face to the side as he tried to pull out Tony’s arc reactor with his metal hand. Tony tried to pull his hand away, but it he couldn’t. And then, the release of energy from Tony’s chest blew Bucky down.

Stephanie gasped as she saw that Bucky’s metal arm had been completely disintegrated. In his moment of awe, Tony shot Bucky with a painful blast to his ribcage. Stephanie charged at Tony and she stood fast with her shield as he blew all his firepower against it.

She punched and she kicked with all her might as she cornered him against the concrete.
“You can’t beat her hand-to-hand.” An electronic female voice warned Tony.

“Analyze her fight pattern.” Tony commanded his replacement AI.

“Scanning.” The voice calculated all of Stephanie’s moves and where she was the most vulnerable, “Countermeasures ready.”

Then, Tony grabbed Stephanie’s shield in mid-swing, stunning her.

“Let’s get this bitch.”

Tony blasted her shield out of her grip and grabbed her incoming punch. He blasted her in the chest to knock her down again. She stood back up, but he expected her moves and knew when to shoot her again, sending her to her knees close to Bucky’s unconscious body.

As Tony stood over her, she looked up at him desperately with her bruised cheeks and cut lip. “I love him...and he still loves me.” She stated. “...So did I.”

Tony slammed his fist against her jaw twice. She barely pulled herself up against the floor, coughing for air. He grabbed her by the straps of her uniform and threw her against the concrete columns facing the snowy mountains.

“Stay down. Final warning.”

But Stephanie ignored him. She took several panting breaths as she struggled back on her feet and put her fists in the air, “I could do this all day.”

He powered up his gauntlet one more time, but he hesitated when Bucky distracted him by weakly grabbing at his boot. Tony kicked him in the face. With his back turned, that gave Stephanie her moment to hoist Tony up in the air and toss him into the ground with a heavy grunt before his jets could take off. That was the last time she was going to let him touch the man she loved. He had officially used up the last of her good graces.

She straddled him, and punched his armor. When she barely made any dents, she grabbed her shield and slammed it into his helmet until she could pull it off. As she powered up for one last swing, Tony covered his head to protect his neck. She thrust the shield into the arc reactor, killing the power in his suit for good.

As Tony looked up at her with fury and defeat in his eyes, her body finally gave in to the exhaustion. With the shield still embedded in his armor, she rolled off of him. Her tears had dried up. She stumbled to her feet and pulled the shield out. She walked over to Bucky, who was awake and reaching for her with his only arm. She carefully picked him up and pulled him close to her waist.

“That shield doesn’t belong to you.” Tony growled through his tired panting, “You don’t deserve it. My father made that shield!”

Stephanie looked up as the memory of the day she got the shield flashed in her eyes. Howard had made a lot of shields, but she chose this one. It called to her because she saw the good it could do to protect people from getting hurt. But today, she choose to use it to hurt Howard’s own son. She was only strong enough to hurt Tony so badly because of Howard’s vita-ray machine. Her body, her suit, her shield...all of these were made by Howard Stark to make her Captain America. Even
S.H.I.E.L.D was founded by him to continue the work of Captain America. Maybe that's why Howard loved her, because she was a product of his ingenuity. Maybe that's why Tony thought he loved her, too.

But Stephanie Barnes wasn't Howard's creation. So today, Stephanie Barnes was saying no, to all of it. Stephanie wasn't a product of Stark's legacy, but Tony was. So it was time to give it back.

She dropped the shield. She carried Bucky with both arms. She survived the fight, but Captain America was dead.
The Fresh Start

The Barneses were shocked to see Prince T’Challa armored as the Black Panther and holding Zemo in cuffs. He must have followed them after all. Stephanie shoved Bucky behind her, but T’Challa held his hand up.

“Don’t be afraid, Captain. I heard everything. I know who is truly responsible for my father’s death. I offer my deepest apologies for not seeing the truth sooner.”

Stephanie looked at T’Challa and Zemo and felt a great relief that both of those problems had been resolved.

“Thank you, Your Highness.” Stephanie said in an exhausted voice, “Do you know what happened to the rest of my team?”

T’Challa shook his head, and Stephanie couldn’t be that optimistic about their odds, considering she just burned a bridge with Stark and all his assets, including his legal counsel.

“I’m taking the true culprit back to the Task Force. I will clear your husband’s name, Captain.” T’Challa carried Zemo by the neck of his coat. Zemo seemed too defeated to care.

“Actually, I think it’s just Mrs. Barnes now.” Stephanie brushed her messy hair off of her sweaty face, “I’d go with you, but I don’t think it’s safe for us.”

“Very well. Take care, I will contact you about your friends.” T’Challa left in his own jet with Zemo in tow.

Stephanie helped Bucky onto the quinjet and sat him down gently. She looked at the charred remains of his metal arm, which had been disintegrated to the top of the bicep.

“Oh Buck...” She held his face gently and kissed him repeatedly, “...Does it hurt?”

“Not as much as everything else.” Bucky groaned.

“We’re gonna get help, okay?” Stephanie started up the quinjet, but her hand hovered over the screen when it asked for coordinates. She had no idea where they could go. They couldn’t go back to the tower, and she couldn’t contact her friends just yet. All they could do was fly away from here. She set the controls to manual and flew off into the cloudy skies.

Bucky fell asleep in his seat, which made Stephanie smile. He earned his rest, and she couldn’t be more grateful that they made it out of there alive. After a few hours of aimless flying, she received a message from T’Challa. When he said he would contact them, she thought he meant in a few days.

His message carried good news and bad news. The good news was that he could take them in as anonymous political refugees and keep them hidden in Wakanda. The bad news was that the rest of her team had been arrested and were being kept in a high security prison known as the Raft. She took a deep breath and squeezed her fist in determination. She may not be Captain America anymore, but she still had a mission before her.

Stephanie landed the quinjet in a discreet location and rendezvoused with Prince T’Challa outside of the Task Force Headquarters. She and Bucky snuck into the cargo hold while T’Challa talked with Ross. Stephanie knew that even though Bucky wasn’t responsible for the Vienna bombings, they still had to answer for their noncompliance, and so far, her friends were already paying for it. As
T’Challa’s jet set course for home, it was Stephanie’s turn to rest. She fell asleep against Bucky’s chest as he leaned against wooden storage boxes. He petted her hair and smiled as he could feel her warm breath against him.

Stephanie woke up when the hatch to the cargo hold opened and Prince T’Challa offered them his hand and welcomed them to Wakanda. Once their eyes adjusted to the light, they awed at the beautiful scenery around them. They smelled fresh moss on wet caverns, and all their words were overpowered by the giant waterfall in front of them. The pathway to the palace lit up before them as they walked through the rocky tunnels.

“I must apologize in advance for your unusual chambers. We are not accustomed to visitors such as yourself.” T’Challa said as he opened the metal doors to their room. They walked into an open part of the cavern, with the gorgeous green jungle visible in the front. The space was larger than any apartment she had ever owned.

“All this space? Just for us?” Stephanie asked.

“It used to be the dining room about a century ago, but now it’s just empty space. And don’t worry about being seen. That entrance is cloaked.” T’Challa explained.

“It’s beautiful, Your Highness. We can’t thank you enough.” Stephanie said.

“It’s the least we can do after all that you have suffered.” T’Challa said. Shortly after, a team of royal medical personnel came to take Bucky in and check on his arm. T’Challa suggested that Stephanie get checked out as well, but she declined, claiming she would heal just fine. She had to get to work on breaking her friends out of prison.

It took a few days, but eventually T’Challa was able to provide her with the schematics of the Raft, along with the numbers of the rooms which contained her friends. Her plan was to go in with just herself and Bucky to sneak her friends out. They only had one shot at it, Zemo’s scheduled incarceration, so it would take careful planning and she couldn’t overlook a single detail.

Everytime Stephanie needed more information on the Raft, she had to wait at least a week for T’Challa’s regular meetings with Everett Ross. Every day that she remained in Wakanda, she remembered her poor friends that were locked up: Sam, Clint, Scott, and Wanda. She teared up every time she thought about poor Wanda. She had promised to protect her and guide her, but all she had done was get her thrown back into a prison. Some nights, she’d wake up and look at Bucky sleeping next to her. She knew it was worth everything she had done, but she had wished that it hadn’t had costed her friends so dearly.

When she started vomiting, she figured the stress was getting to her. Her meals were brought to her room by the servants, and sometimes she felt queasy before she even finished the meal. She decided to finally take up T’Challa’s offer on getting a check up with his doctors. She told them about she was still sore even though the fight had been almost a month before. As the doctors took fluid samples from her and analyzed them on their holographic screens, she excused herself and ran to the bathroom. She felt so embarrassed to throw up within earshot of the doctors, fearing that she had insulted them after all their help. When she came out, she noticed the doctors were discussing amongst themselves, and that T’Challa had surprisingly joined them. As they saw her walk towards them, they went quiet.

“Is something wrong?” Stephanie asked.

“Mrs. Barnes,” T’Challa asked politely, his hands poised behind his back as he stood in his regal dress, “How long have you been feeling unwell?”
“A couple weeks, maybe?” Stephanie blushed, “I’m so sorry. You’ve been so gracious and the food is delicious, but I think my stomach is still getting used to different spices and—”

“Stephanie…” T’Challa looked at her kindly, “...You’re pregnant.”

Stephanie froze. Her mouth dropped and stuttered.

“A-Are you sure?” She asked, her eyes welling up in disbelief.

T’Challa nodded, reading her face to see if this was good news or dangerous news for her. She covered her face as tears squeezed out of her eyes. As she wiped her cheeks, they could see a smile breaking through.

“Congratulations, Mrs. Barnes.” The lead doctor said.

“Thank you.” She hugged all of them without thinking, including T’Challa.

She swiftly ran back to her room and found Bucky in bed taking a midday nap. Without even a stump of a left arm, he slept on his side often. T’Challa told her that he could have a new arm for him in time for the breakout. She jumped on the bed and straddled him to wake him up a series of quick kisses to his face.

“Ah, Steph! What is it?” He murmured with a chuckle as his eyes squinted at the sunlight peering in.

“I went to the medical bay today...and they told me...that I’m pregnant.” She whispered as she brought her face close this.

“Mmm…” He smiled, “I knew it.”

“You knew?” She playfully smacked his chest, “How could you possibly know before me?”

“Because why else would you be throwing up at four in the morning when the serum was supposed to mean you’d never have another sick day in your life?” Bucky said.

“You always were the smart one.” She lied on top of him and kissed him.

When she jumped up she told him, “So I got the time card records for the security guards at the Raft. Most of them are pretty prompt on switching out, however, there is one guard who is supposed to be at Cell Block D at 10:45, but he doesn’t usually get there until 10:49. It’s a small window, but it could be our shot.”

“Stephanie…” Bucky said softly, “You just found out that you’re pregnant. Are you sure you can still go through with this? You’re trying to break into a maximum security prison.”

“Yes,” Stephanie said confidently, “As long as we do this while I can still see my toes, we’ll be fine.”

“But if you get hurt—”

“Buck,” She sat down next to him, “I need to do this. They sacrificed everything for me. I have to do the same for them. Besides, the only one who has ever come close to doing me in was you.”

A couple more weeks passed by, and she was putting the final touches on her plan. T’Challa would sneak them onto the carrier that was taking Zemo to his cell, and from there they would take out the security for the Avengers’ cell block, unlock the doors with stolen passkeys, and whisk their friends away to a nearby ship that was supposed to pass through around the time of their escape. She was
supposed to meet with Bucky and T’Challa to go over the plan in detail, but Bucky didn’t get there on time. She checked their room and found it empty. She found him just as he was leaving the medical bay.

“Hey, the briefing started 20 minutes ago, where were you?” She asked.

“I was...here.” Bucky gestured towards the doctor’s office.

“Are they going to fit you with a new arm soon?” Stephanie asked.

“Stephanie…” Bucky signed and pushed his hair behind his ear, “There’s something I need to talk to you about.”

Bucky took Stephanie to their room, sat her down on the bed and told her about how he wanted to go back into cryogenic freezing. Her heart shattered and she immediately burst into tears.

“No! Why? We finally have everything we wanted.” She wailed, “I just got you back! I can’t lose you again.”

“You won’t lose me. It’s just until they can get this stuff out of my head. You saw what Zemo did, how easily he just turned me back into that-” Bucky tried to reason with her, knowing it was an uphill battle.

“Isn’t there something else you can try? Some kind of therapy or surgery? Something that won’t put you back to sleep…” Stephanie pleaded.

“I already discussed it with the doctors, and they said that they’ve never seen anything like this before. They need time to figure out a treatment, but until then...I’m too dangerous to be awake.” Bucky said softly.

Stephanie grabbed his shoulders, “No, you’re not! Not to me! Zemo is under control, that book was destroyed. No one is going to use you like that again.”

“You don’t know that.” Bucky shook his head, tearing up as well, “If something happened...and I hurt our-”

He bit his lips before he could finish the thought, it was too unbearable. As Stephanie looked into his eyes, she could see he was serious about this. She also knew that this meant he wouldn’t be participating in the prison break, and she would have to rework the plan without him in it. Yes, she was mad at him, but she loved him too much to take it out on him. She sniffled as she pressed her forehead on his.

“Stephanie, I’m so sorry.” Bucky wrapped his arm around her, “I just can’t do anything right, can I?”

She calmed down after the initial shock wore off. The Winter Soldier couldn’t just be put away in the back of his mind. She knew that for a long time. If she had to wait a little longer for Bucky to get better, then it was worth it. After all, now they had all the time in the world. Her main worry was that he would be frozen so long that he missed the entire pregnancy. She didn’t want to do this without him.

“If this is going to help you.” Stephanie kissed his cheek, “Then you should do it.”

That night, as Bucky drifted to sleep, she wrapped her arms around him to spoon him. She kissed his shoulder as she pressed her chest against his back. She took in the scent of his hair and traced the line of his hips. She’d been so spoiled by the past several weeks where she had gotten used to sleeping
next to him again. If she didn’t have a baby inside of her now, she would consider asking the doctors to freeze her, too. So at least they’d be sleeping next to each other the whole time.

A few days before the big day, she asked another favor from T’Challa. He gave her two outdated flip phones that he’d confiscated from black market dealers. Their network was untraceable by modern computers, which is why they were popular by terrorists, but she had far less sinister motives. She planned to mail one to Tony, along with a letter that would mark the first time she contacted him in almost three months. She’d caught a few updates on the news, but they kept quiet on the fate of the rest of the Avengers. She wrote several drafts, but the one she sent read:

Tony,

I’m glad you’re back at the compound. I don’t like the idea of you rattling around a mansion by yourself. We all need family. The Avengers are yours, maybe more so than mine. I’ve been an orphan since I was 18. Bucky was my only family. I never really fit in anywhere, not with other housewives and not even in the Army. My faith is in people, I guess, individuals. And I’m happy to say that for the most part, they haven’t let me down. Which is why I can’t let them down, either. Locks can be replaced, but maybe they shouldn’t.

I know I hurt you, Tony. I guess I thought by not telling you about your parents that I was sparing you, but I can see now that I was really sparing myself. And I’m sorry. Hopefully, one day you can understand. I wish we agreed on the Accords, I really do. I know you’re doing what you believe in, and that’s all any of us can do. That’s all any of us should.

So no matter what, I promise you, if you need us, if you need me, I’ll be there.

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After her first trimester appointment, she headed straight for the Raft. Since Bucky had to prepare for his freezing and T’Challa couldn’t get caught in anything illegal, Stephanie went solo for the actual prison break. Her planning paid off, as every setback that came her way had an alternative strategy already in play. She knocked out all the security guards in her way without any of them coming close to hurting her. She left a string of unconscious bodies in her path. She unlocked the gate to her team’s cell block and strolled in to see them all where she expected them to be.

She approached Sam’s cell, who smiled like he had been expecting her.

“Sorry, I’m late.” Stephanie said, “I’ve been little busy.”

“Yes, you have.” Sam nodded as he noticed the bump under her jacket.

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Stephanie arrived back in Wakanda with her team just in time to see Bucky one more time. She walked in as the doctors hooked him up to an IV to balance his fluids before he went under. She held his arm as he sat on the table.

“And you’re sure about this?” Stephanie asked once more.

Bucky quietly sighed, “I can’t trust my own mind. So until they figure out how to get this stuff out of my head, going back under is the best thing. For everybody…”

He sadly smiled as he put his hand on her abdomen, “…especially the baby.”
Stephanie grabbed his hand and kissed it, and then remembered what the doctors had given her before showing her to his room. She pulled a small photo out of her pocket.

“I got the sonogram. Look.” She held it out and pointed to the clearly defined fetus, “The details on their machines are amazing. You can see almost everything. The nose already looks like yours.”

Bucky chuckled and looked at the picture intensely, trying to memorize it while he still could.

“I love you.” Stephanie whispered and kissed him on the lips, “We’ll be right here when you wake up.”

Stephanie watched as they strapped Bucky into the chamber and he closed his eyes. The glass cover sealed him shut, and loud jets of cold air whooshed until the container was frosted with ice. Once the pod was secure, she wiped the condensation off of the glass and taped the sonogram in front of his face.
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Stephanie shuffled to the cryochamber with orthopedic sandals and a long black summer dress draped over her protuding abdomen. Gold discs decorated each shoulder to complement the gold belt under her chest. She took a seat in front of the glass screen and pulled out a flexible holographic screen and started tapping the buttons.

“I don’t know how much you can hear in there but…” She slid a scale on her screen and a squishy thumping noise erupted through the chamber’s speakers, “That’s the baby’s heartbeat.”

She let it play for a few moments before turning the volume down, “So it’s pretty strong, which is the good news. The...less good news is that...he was due last week. His vitals are fine, so we know he’s okay, so it’s me that they’re worried about. With your serum and my serum combined, it’s safe to say that this is the first su...the first enhanced birth so the doctors don’t exactly know what to expect.”

Her voice choked on the thought of calling her baby a super soldier. He hadn’t even been born yet, and yet she knew the expectations the world would place on him. That’s why she stayed hidden in Wakanda throughout her whole pregnancy. If anyone got their hands on her child, who knew what they would do to him? Plus, she was already a fugitive on her own. She had more than enough reasons to hide. She told her team that they didn’t have to stay with her if they didn’t want to, and so they each made their choice.

“I don’t think I’m in any danger, or at least I don’t want to think that,” She continued, even though she was tearing up, “I mean, babies are overdue all the time, and it doesn’t hurt the mother. He just needs a little more time to grow, right? Although T’Challa is especially worried. He thinks I should consider inducing labor, but I don’t know. It’s kind of funny. I’ve wanted this for so long, and now I don’t even know what to do.”

She pressed her forehead against the glass and asked quietly “What do you think we should do?”

A week later, on Washington’s birthday of all days, Stephanie went into labor. She was still strong enough to walk to the medical bay even as the contractions hit her along the way. The doctors quickly escorted her to one of their delivery rooms, which surprised her when she saw something resembling a chair more than a bed.

“Don’t I have to lie down?” She asked as she changed into the sleek white hospital gown.

“The proper technique for childbirth is a more of a crouching position.” The midwife explained as she leaned Stephanie over the chair and set her knees in the designated cushioned pads. Two ropes descended from the ceiling that Stephanie had to wrap around her hands and squeeze. The nurses hooked her up to an EKG to watch her heart rate for complications.

She rested there for hours as the contractions made her groan in pain. It wasn’t an end-of-the-world type of pain, but it was worse than getting shot or stabbed. Those times felt a like a sharp shock followed by dull throbbing. This was a continuous streak of coiling and stretching, like her guts were getting chewed like bubblegum.
“Where’s...His Majesty?” Stephanie asked breathlessly.

“He’s preoccupied at the moment, but he has been made aware that you’re in labor.” The nurse answered.

When she was fully dilated, they told her to push. She hoisted herself up on the ropes as she strained and squeezed herself.

“Very good. Do it again.” The midwife told her.

She did as they said and pushed and pushed, but even her strength was weakening after so many contractions.

“You’re doing excellent. Just a few more.” The midwife encouraged her more, placing an assuring hand on her back. She was very nice, but she wasn’t who Stephanie needed.

“I...I can’t do this alone…” Stephanie sobbed and clenched the ropes for support.

“We’re here for you. Just a little more, Stephanie. I need you to push.” The midwife told her, but Stephanie needed more time to muster up her strength.

“Push now, Stephanie.” The midwife said. Stephanie squeezed her eyes tightly and struggled to collect herself again.

Suddenly, a firm hand grabbed her wrist and slipped her hand out of the supports. And then another, metallic hand did the same with her other wrist. She opened her eyes to see Bucky’s rugged face and soft eyes smiling at her.

“C’mon, Steph. You can do it.” He encouraged her, giving her his hands to squeeze.

“Buck…” She turned her tears into a soft chuckle.

“You knew I couldn’t miss this.” He kissed her sweat-covered forehead.

With Bucky by her side, she got the second wind to give the last few pushes that brought their son into the world. After the doctors cut the cord and measured him at 9lbs and 7oz, they handed him to Bucky while they brought a bed for Stephanie to rest in.

“You were right, he does have my nose.” Bucky said as he held the screeching fat-cheeked baby boy delicately in his metal arm. Stephanie reaches her hand to touch Bucky’s face first.

“How are you?” She asked exhaustedly.

“You’re the one who gave birth, and you want to know how I am?” Bucky smiled.

“I’m really glad you’re here.” Stephanie rubbed her baby’s soft head to soothe him, “I guess he’s blonde, like me.”

“For now, he is. It might turn brown when he’s older. Your hair gets darker sometimes.” Bucky said and handed him over to his mother, “You got a name for my boy, yet?”

Stephanie nodded and cradled the baby close to her chest, “Carter. Carter Joseph Barnes.”

“I like it.” Bucky touched the baby’s hand, “Hey, Carter. It’s gonna be an adventure taking of care of you.”
The medical team stood at attention when T’Challa walked in. The king walked towards the family and nodded.

“Congratulations. Your son looks to be completely healthy.” He told them.

“We can’t thank you enough for this.” Stephanie said.

“Your family and my father...you are both victims.” T’Challa looked out into the horizons of his country, “If I can help one of you find peace…”

“You know if they find out we’re here…” Bucky put his arm protectively around his wife and child, “They’ll come for us.”

T’Challa looked at the boy and confidently responded,

“Let them try.”

Chapter End Notes

And that concludes the first entry in my Stephanie series! I can tell you know that there WILL be a sequel to this fic, but since this series tries to follow canon, we will have to wait until after Black Panther comes out. I won’t shoehorn Stephanie where she doesn't belong like some white savior but whatever happens to T’Challa and Wakanda will affect the Barnes family dramatically since they're at the mercy of the King. I may also go back and fill in the blank space that is Avengers 1 since Stephanie had enough notable scenes after all. Until then, that's all for now, and I hope to see you next month!

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